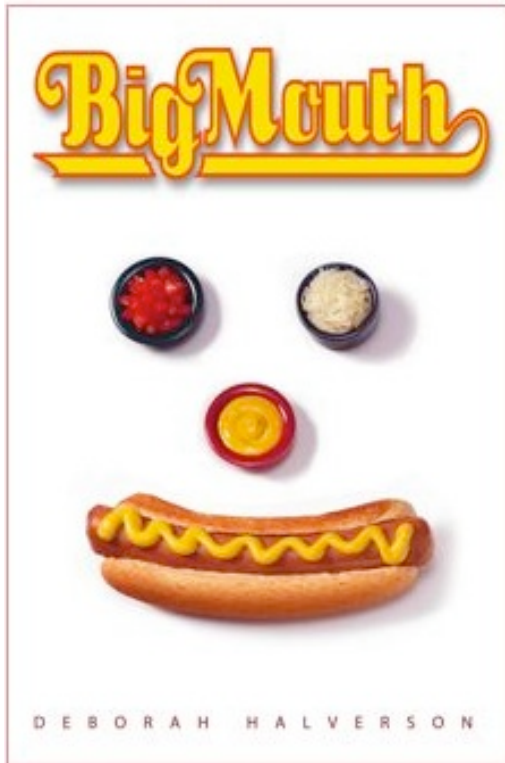


Curriculum Guide

for teachers, instructors, and book groups

Big Mouth



by Deborah Halverson

A big boy with a big dream

Fourteen-year-old Shermie Thuff wants to be the fastest, richest, most famous competitive eater in the world . . . all he has to do is eat 54 hot dogs in 12 minutes.

“Funny, touching, and deeply gross.... Good fun!”
—Bruce Hale, author of the *Chet Gecko* series

Delacorte Press, June 2008, ages 10 and up
isbn 978-0-385-73394-6
www.IamThuffEnuff.com
www.randomhouse.com/teens

A Funny and Fun Way to Talk about Something Serious

Big Mouth is a novel about loyalty and friendship, about choosing balance over unhealthy extremes, about seeing the line between real life and TV reality, and, most importantly, about recognizing the misguided reasonings that lead to eating disorders. These universal themes speak to all teens, but by combining high school machismo, sports machismo, and the hilariously bizarre world of competitive eating, *Big Mouth* is especially relevant to teen boys. Today, 15 percent of high school boys are dieting, with peer pressure, media influences, and the weight demands of sports such as wrestling leading the list of reasons why. *Big Mouth* offers all readers an entertaining, funny, farcical, and emotionally powerful opportunity to explore these pressures.

About this Guide

The following activities, questions, and facts are intended as a starting place for discussion and offer a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Big Mouth*. In addition to traditional book reports and classroom discussion, *Big Mouth* is perfect for independent or small group research assignments. This guide breaks up the book into topics that allow for focused discussion and activities. For a condensed single-page Book Club Guide, please go to “Book Club Guides” at www.DeborahHalverson.com.

Competitive Eating

The sport of competitive eating has risen in popularity and profile, with more competitions each year, greater media coverage, and very likely more kids like Shermie “Thuff Enuff” Thuff dreaming of the day they turn eighteen and can belly up to the pro table. A sample of eating records:

Hot Dogs:

66 Nathan’s Famous Hot Dogs and Buns

12 minutes

July 4, 2007, Joey Chestnut*

**Defeated six-time Nathan’s Famous International*

Hot Dog Eating Champion Takeru “Tsunami”

Kobayashi, who held the previous 53.75 HDB record that inspires Sherman Thuff in Big Mouth.

Hamburgers:

103 Krystal Burgers

8 minutes

October 28, 2007, Joey Chestnut

Pizza:

22 Slices (of a 16” pizza)

10 Minute

Aug. 18, 2007, Patrick Bertoletti

Cow Brains:

57 (17.7 pounds)

15 minutes

Takeru Kobayashi

Mayonnaise:

4 32-ounce bowls mayonnaise

8 minutes

Oleg Zhornitskiy

Jalapenos, Pickled:

177 Pickled Jalapeno Peppers

15 Minutes

Aug. 26, 2006, Patrick Bertoletti

Candy Bars:

Two Pounds Chocolate Candy Bars

6 minutes

Eric Booker

Source: International Federation of Competitive Eating, www.ifoce.com, 2008.

Discussion questions and activities about competitive eating:

- ⇒ Challenge students to guess the records for each food listed above, then read the records aloud. How close were the students’ estimates?
- ⇒ Ask students: Have you ever seen an eating competition? Why do you think they fascinate people, even those who are grossed out by them?
- ⇒ Shermie says competitive eating is a “sport” and competitive eaters are “athletes.” Do you agree? How would you define “sport” and “athlete”? Is chess a sport? How about pillow fighting, or lawnmower racing, or spitting for distance? Could competitive reading be a sport?
- ⇒ To train for competition, competitive eaters may drink a gallon of water at a time, binge and purge, or do jaw strength exercises. At the beginning of your discussion of *Big Mouth*, ask the students if these practices are okay because they are part of a sports training regimen? Ask this question again at the conclusion of your discussion. Are the students’ answers different the second time?
- ⇒ Did you know?: International Federation of Competitive Eating rules require competitors to be at least eighteen years old, and an emergency medical technician must be present at every competition.

Eating Disorders

24 million Americans suffer from eating disorders, 10% of them male. Celebrities who have gone public about battles with eating disorders include Matt Damon, Billy Bob Thornton, Elton John, Paula Abdul, Fiona Apple, Tracey Gold, Princess Diana, and Spice Girls Geri Halliwell and Victoria Beckham. The following is a selection of the eating disorder statistics, with emphasis on young people:

- Over half of females aged 18-25 would prefer to be run over by a truck than be fat; two-thirds of them would rather be mean or stupid.
- Two out of 5 women and 1 out of 5 men would trade three to five years of their life to achieve their goal body weight.
- 11% of high school students have been diagnosed with an eating disorder
- 15% of high school boys are dieting
- 40 – 60% of high school girls diet; 13% purge
- 30 – 40% of junior high girls worry about weight
- 80% of all children have been on a diet by the time that they have reached the fourth grade
- 40% of nine-year-old girls have dieted; 9% of them have vomited to lose weight
- 45% of 1st – 6th grade boys and girls want to be thinner, 37% have already dieted
- 42% of 1st – 3rd grade girls want to be thinner
- The #1 wish of girls 11- to 17-years-old is to lose weight

Discussion questions and activities about eating disorders:

- ⇒ In *Big Mouth*, Gardo uses laxatives and exercises obsessively to lose weight fast. These can be warning signs of an eating disorder. Other signs include becoming disgusted with former favorite foods and running water to cover the sounds of vomiting. Have students research warning signs of eating disorders and make a list to share with the class.
- ⇒ Unrealistic media images are among the pressures that can lead to eating disorders. Have students name characters on their favorite TV shows who are overweight. Now have them name characters who are thin. Compare the length of the two lists and discuss how each group of characters is portrayed. Does one group have more “good guys,” or positive portrayals?
- ⇒ Have students brainstorm other pressures that can lead to eating disorders and then research them on the Internet. Ask students to consider which, if any, of these pressures they feel.
- ⇒ 32% of high school wrestlers have eating disorders. Other sports, for boys and girls, stress low body weight and have high rates of athletes who are dieting or suffering from eating disorders. Have students role play a situation in which a coach instructs an athlete to lose weight quickly.
- ⇒ The sooner an eating disorder is treated, the easier it is for the person to recover. Discuss the importance of early intervention and help students brainstorm the adults and organizations they can turn to if they suspect that someone they know may be suffering from an eating disorder. Include the organizations listed in the “Resources” section of this guide.

For more information about eating disorders, contact the National Eating Disorders Association at 1-800-931-2237 or www.NationalEatingDisorders.org.

Sources: The National Eating Disorder Organization, the Eating Disorders Coalition, the Alliance for Eating Disorders Awareness, Anorexia Nervosa and Related Eating Disorders, Inc., and the Center for Adolescent Discovery and Change.

Between You and Me (Social Studies Curriculum)

Big Mouth themes include friendship and loyalty, rebelling against authority versus obeying blindly, and choosing heroes. The following discussion questions and exercises focus on dealing with others.

- ⇒ Shermie worries that he's "ratting out" his friend if he tells someone about his concerns for that friend. Have students write about a time when they had to choose between keeping a friend's secret or revealing it for the friend's own good. Was it a black-and-white choice? What was the outcome? Would they make the same choice now?
- ⇒ The title *Big Mouth* is as much about loyalty to friends as it is about eating. Shermie feels betrayed by Lucy, Lucy feels betrayed by Shermie. Do you think either one is right?
- ⇒ Secrets swirl around Del Heiny Junior High School #13. When is a secret harmless and when is it trouble? Under what circumstances is it okay to tell someone's secret? Ask students if anyone has ever told one of your secrets? How did it make the student feel? Looking back, does the student think the friend was right to reveal the secret?
- ⇒ The Mustard Rebellion sweeps through Del Heiny Jr High #13. What outlets are available at your school for voicing dissatisfaction? If there aren't any, have students brainstorm forums for self-expression.
- ⇒ Do you think the real Mustard Tagger was nabbed? If not, who do you think s/he is?
- ⇒ Why does Shermie idolize Captain Quixote? Why do people need heroes? Is it okay for a hero to have flaws or make bad decisions? Have students write about their heroes, including both their strengths and their weaknesses.
- ⇒ Shermie's fame gains him friends. It also loses him some. Is the tradeoff worth it? What are the pros and cons of fame? Would you make that trade?

Are YOU Thuff Enuff? (Art Curriculum)

Gardo not only turns Shermie into a lean, mean eating machine, he also turns him into a product. The following activities and questions focus on advertising.

- ⇒ Shermie likes to imagine the commercials he'll star in when he's a famous athlete. Have each student write, act out, or film a commercial in which they are endorsing a product. Have them choose real products that reflect their personalities or interests.
- ⇒ Have students put together an ad campaign for a fictional product, including a jingle, a product logo, and a poster. Have them act out or film a commercial for their product.
- ⇒ Del Heiny Ketchup Company sponsors Shermie's school district, turning all the mascots into tomatoes and requiring that all food served in the cafeterias be ketchup dunkable. Have students brainstorm sponsors for their school. How would their sponsors change the school?

Mad Max's Science Concepts in Action (Science Curriculum)

Shermie and his friends love Mad Max's class "Science Concepts in Action." You can learn more about or recreate all her experiments.

- ⇒ Static Electricity: Mad Max bends water with her comb to demonstrate static electricity in action. Have students locate a water-bending experiment on the Internet then recreate it themselves.
- ⇒ Forensics: Forensic investigation is a popular field thanks to TV shows that feature it. Mad Max demonstrates forensic investigation in an experiment using a rotting pig. Have students research careers in forensic investigation.
- ⇒ Calorimetry: One of Shermie's favorite Mad Max experiments involves burning a potato chip to determine its calorie content. Have students research the concept of calories including how calories influence body weight, the recommended daily caloric intake for teens, and the effects of not getting enough calories.
- ⇒ Water: Students can easily recreate Sir Isaac Newton's Water Bucket and Gravity Water Balloon experiments. Have students research and conduct these experiments.

Extreme Lifestyles (Health Curriculum)

Lifestyle habits are formed when people are young, so the school years are the time to commit to a healthy and active lifestyle. Read *Big Mouth*'s Author's Note aloud in class as a lead-in to the following questions and activities.

- ⇒ Have students look up the President's Challenge on the Internet (www.presidentschallenge.org) and keep track of their physical activity for a week. Have them compare it to the guidelines for kids and teens on the President's Challenge site.
- ⇒ Have students research the food pyramid and keep a list of the foods they eat every day for a week. Have them compare their week of eating compares to the recommended dietary allowances on the pyramid. (Suggested website: www.mypyramid.gov, from the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, an organization of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.)
- ⇒ Shermie adopts the "Whatever-on-Saturday" rule. Is it a good rule? Why or why not? Do you think Shermie can hold out week after week? Could *you* hold out until Saturday?
- ⇒ It's easy to obsess about something you love. Do Shermie, Gardo, and Lucy go too far with their interests? How far is too far? Have students rate, on a scale of 1 to 10, how extreme they themselves are about something they love.

The Pen is Mightier than the Spoon (Writing Curriculum)

The joy of fiction is relating to a character and growing with him or her. The following writing exercises encourage students to relate *Bit Mouth* experiences to their own lives:

- ⇒ Have students write about Shermie's growth. What things does he know about himself at the end of the book that he doesn't know in Chapter One? Is he a stronger person? Is he a better friend? Would he choose different heroes? Has his opinion of fame changed?
- ⇒ Have students write about the friendship triangle of Shermie, Lucy, and Gardo. Do all three get along equally? How does their group dynamic change by the end of the book? Is Shermie better for having Gardo as a friend? How? Is he better for having Lucy as a friend? Does the trio work together for better or worse?
- ⇒ Lucy uses astrology to give her life structure and to help her understand others. Have students research their Zodiac signs and write about how they match or differ from their sign's profile.
- ⇒ Have each student choose one of the following statements and write an essay defending it:
 - A. Prominent sports figures and celebrities should lead their personal lives in such a way that they can serve as role models for young people.
 - B. Prominent sports figures and celebrities are just doing a job, which happens to place them in the public eye, but they should be able to lead their personal lives as they wish.
 - C. A friend isn't a true friend unless s/he's willing to lose that friend for the sake of the friend's well being.
 - D. A true friend wouldn't rat out another friend, no matter what.

Other Fun and Factual Activities:

- ⇒ Have students research a food mentioned in the book: mustard, ketchup, hot dogs, gummy bears, Three Musketeers Bars, Big Burpee tomatoes, etc. Have them report on the food's history, how it is made, how it is marketed, and fun or unusual facts about it.
- ⇒ Have a class party that includes the foods mentioned in the book.
- ⇒ Challenge the students to help you solve "15 across" in Grampy's crossword puzzle: "a six-letter word for red hot in the land without shadows." Think you've solved it? E-mail the author at Deborah@DeborahHalverson.com to see if you're right.

Resources

For eating records, eater profiles, a tongue-in-cheek “history” of the sport, and other information about the competitive eating:

The International Federation of Competitive Eating, www.ifoce.com
Major League Eating, www.MajorLeagueEating.com

For statistics, articles, news, and other information about eating disorders:

www.NationalEatingDisorders.org
www.anred.com
www.eatingdisorderscoalition.org
www.eatingdisorderinfo.org
www.centerfordiscovery.com

For a variety of facts about these and other topics in *Big Mouth*:

Deborah Halverson’s website, www.DeborahHalverson.com
Shermie Thuff’s *Big Mouth* fansite, www.IamThuffEnuff.com

Fansite: www.IamThuffEnuff.com

Shermie Thuff’s personal “Official Shermie ‘Thuff Enuff’ Thuff Fansite.” Site includes Shermie’s blog, bios of his friends and links to their MySpace pages (where students can read their blogs and send them messages), a Thuff Enuff merchandise store, excerpts from Shermie’s *Book of Good & Tasty Things*, a Galactic Warrior Fan Corner, excerpts from Shermie’s “biography” *Big Mouth*, links for topics in *Big Mouth* (eating disorders, gummy bears, etc.), a “Behind the Scenes of *Big Mouth*” blog series, fun facts about Del Heiny Junior High #13, its sponsor, and the Mustard Revolution, and a “Catch & Release” feature that tracks copies of *Big Mouth* left in public places for new readers to find, read, email the author about, and then re-release.

About the Author



Deborah Halverson edited books at Harcourt Children’s Books for ten years—until she climbed over the desk and tried out the author’s chair on the other side. Now she is an award-winning author of books for young readers, including the teen novels *Honk If You Hate Me* and *Big Mouth*. Armed with a master’s degree in American literature and a fascination with pop culture, she sculpts stories from extreme events and places—tattoo parlors, fast-food joints, and, most extreme of all, high schools. Deborah lives with her husband and triplet sons in San Diego, California. For more FAQs about Deborah and behind-the-scenes glimpses into the creation of her books, visit www.DeborahHalverson.com.

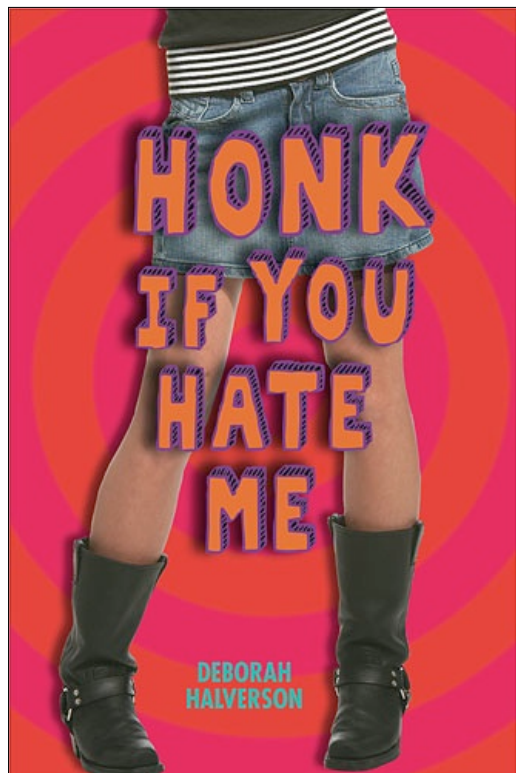
APPEARANCES: Deborah is an accomplished speaker and workshop instructor. For more information about appearances with writers’ groups, teens, teachers and librarians, or general audiences, visit www.DeborahHalverson.com or e-mail Deborah at Deborah@DeborahHalverson.com.

DISCLAIMER: *Do not try speed-eating at home.* The author and Random House do not advocate speed-eating for people under the age of eighteen, and then only in a controlled environment with appropriate rules and with an emergency medical technician present. The author and Random House are against at-home training of any kind and strongly discourage younger individuals from eating for speed or quantity under any circumstances.

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Also by Deborah Halverson

Honk If You Hate Me



Delacorte Press, 2007, ages 12 and up
isbn 978-0-385-73393-9
www.randomhouse.com/teens

Well-behaved girls don't make history

Blamed for ruining the town by torching the futon factory ten years ago, sixteen-year-old Mona Kent finally decides to take charge of her life . . . but the revelations—and the revolution—that follow burn hotter than any fire.

Gayle McCandliss Literary Award Winner

“Teeming with offbeat characters and situations.”
—*Publishers Weekly*

“Filled with delightfully quirky characters, the twists and turns of community legend, and a serious exploration of the role that identity plays in our lives.”
—KLIATT