

# Holiday House Readers' Guide

## For Further Exploration

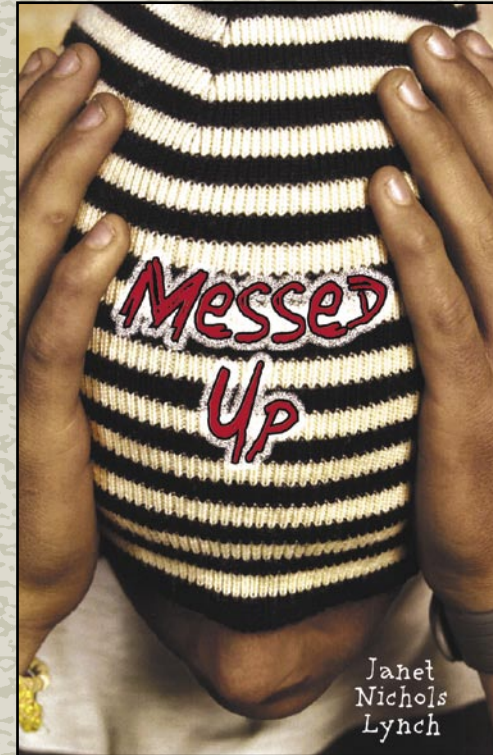
- Almost all cities suffer gang-related crimes. Find out how schools and communities deal with gangs. The following website may be helpful: [www.schoolsecurity.org/trends/gangs.html](http://www.schoolsecurity.org/trends/gangs.html).
- To explore the concept of zero tolerance discipline in schools, check out the following website: [www.schoolsecurity.org/trends/zero\\_tolerance.html](http://www.schoolsecurity.org/trends/zero_tolerance.html). Sponsor a debate about the pros and cons of this trend.
- Eighteen is the age when a person may be emancipated from his or her family. R. D. is allowed to live alone at sixteen. What are the laws in your state regarding minors living alone?

## About the Author

**Janet Nichols Lynch's** short stories have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Seventeen*, and other publications. She has also written novels for young adults and nonfiction books on music for adults. She lives in California in the San Joaquin Valley, where this book is set.

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**Messed Up**  
Janet Nichols Lynch

## About the Book

**R. D. Mitchell's life is messed up.** Fifteen years old and in the eighth grade like many students at Buzz Aldrin Middle School, he is Mexican American. His father is totally out of the picture, and his mother has been in prison most of his life. Trouble seems to follow R. D. He's been suspended from school so many times that it seems unlikely he will ever catch up in his schoolwork, and he's a moving target for gang activity. Until recently, Rose, his grandmother, and her boyfriend, Earl, have been the only sources of stability in his life. But Rose leaves in search of more adventure, and Earl dies. Completely alone, R. D. is faced with the most difficult challenge of his life: Can he keep Earl's death a secret to avoid being put in a group home?

# Questions for Classroom Discussion

- R. D. says that red and blue are the colors of his town. Schools often don't allow gangs to display their colors. Why do gang members think it is important for their "color" to be somewhere on their body? How are gangs the source of most of the discipline problems at Buzz Aldrin Middle School? Some kids join gangs because it gives them a sense of belonging. Discuss why R. D. has never joined a gang. Explore why students such as R. D. might be easy targets for gangs.
- R. D. claims that he isn't guilty of half the stuff for which he has been busted. Why is he so willing to take the blame for things he doesn't do? Mr. Bowen, assistant principal of discipline, calls R. D. incorrigible. Debate whether this is an appropriate label for R. D. Why is it easy for school administrators to "write off" kids such as R. D.? How do labels follow kids throughout their school years? Debate whether R. D. has changed his label by the end of the novel.
- Ms. Trueblood tells R. D. that he isn't a failure but that the system has failed him. What could the system do to help kids such as R. D.? Buzz Aldrin Middle School has a full-time law enforcement officer. How might having a full-time psychologist and social worker be equally important? How has the same system that failed R. D. failed Ms. Trueblood, a new teacher at school? What could school systems do to aid new teachers in dealing with rough kids from tough environments?
- Discuss the "zero tolerance" discipline philosophy. How does this practice fail kids such as R. D.? Ms. Trueblood defends R. D. when he is suspended for his role in breaking up a fight between two girls on the first day of school. Why is Mr. Bowen unwilling to listen to Ms. Trueblood? Discuss how zero tolerance focuses more on what students do wrong than on promoting what they do right.
- On the surface, R. D. seems fearless. Why is appearing fearless necessary to survive in a school and community plagued by gangs? At what point in the novel does the reader know that R. D. has many fears? Why is R. D. so frightened by the prospect of being sent to a group home?
- Discuss the characteristics of a bully. R. D. has come face-to-face with bullies on many occasions. How does Bobby Scudder bully R. D.? Explain how he may be the worst bully that R. D. has ever encountered. Bullies are often insecure people who elevate themselves by beating up on others. Debate whether Bobby is insecure or greedy. What is Nadine's role in Bobby's bullying scheme? How does their attempt to bully R. D. backfire on them?
- Ms. Trueblood instructs each student to draw a coat of arms. The students are to put a symbol in each of the four sections that best represents them. R. D. draws four zeros. What does this reveal about his self-esteem? Ms. Trueblood tells R. D. that his symbols should be a sword, a bow and arrow, a ball of worms, and an egg. Discuss what each of these symbols would represent for R. D. What would Ms. Trueblood's coat of arms look like?
- Discuss R. D.'s relationship with Rose, his grandmother. He is hurt when she leaves Earl for another man. She explains to R. D. that she has been unlucky in love and is looking for an adventure. Debate whether her decision to leave R. D. with Earl is a selfish one. She claims that Earl needs R. D. How does R. D. need Earl?
- R. D.'s life has been like a roller-coaster ride. In his case, there appear to be more downs than ups. At what point does he suffer the greatest "down"?
- R. D. doesn't know how to grieve. How does reading *The Gift of the Magi* release his emotions regarding Earl's death? R. D. has never known much about his father. Why does Earl's death cause him to ask Rose questions about his father? How is finding out that his father didn't just abandon him a source of comfort to R. D.?
- At what point in the novel does R. D. begin his climb out of darkness? Who is responsible for helping him see that his life is hopeful and not hopeless?
- How might R. D. define friendship? Why doesn't he want to be friends with Scraps and Dominic? He and Jeanette Whitmore become friends when they work together on a school project. How does Mrs. Whitmore embrace R. D. and make him feel welcome at her house? R. D. isn't accustomed to being trusted. What makes Mrs. Whitmore trust R. D. enough to take her daughter to the Harvest Ball? What makes R. D. know that he can trust Jeanette enough to tell her that Earl is dead?
- R. D. says that he doesn't need a lawyer to tell him that Nadine should have the house. How does this reveal R. D.'s "true colors"? Which of the symbols of his coat of arms best describes this act of fairness? What colors best represent kindness and fairness?
- R. D. holds a private funeral for Earl in the backyard. He says, "I'm sorry you didn't live to see me make you proud." Why is it so important to R. D. that he make Earl proud? How is following a straight path the best tribute he can give Earl?