

Double or Nothing

written by Dennis Foon

genre: NOVEL, FICTION

themes: TEENS
ADDICTIONS
RELATIONSHIPS
FRIENDSHIPS
CHOICES AFFECTING OTHERS

suitable for: GRADES 7–12

This is a novel about a boy in high school who has it all: high grades, a well-paying part-time job, a new girlfriend, a supportive mother ... and a habit of placing friendly bets that turns into an addiction to gambling. Written in the first person, we read through the main character's perspective about the changing situation and what is controlling it.

“Like much of Foon’s work, this book packs a dynamite educational punch and belongs on high-school reading lists.”

—Maureen Garvie,
former English teacher and school librarian

Dennis Foon bio: Dennis Foon is the author of over 20 plays and has written extensively for television. His plays have been produced internationally, he has received the British Theater Award, two Chalmers awards, the Jesse Richardson Career Achievement Award, and the International Arts for Young Audiences Award.

Dennis's first book for young adults, *Double or Nothing*, is the debut novel in Annick Press's new Dog House Books series, dedicated to cutting-edge novels for teens. This novel grew out of Dennis's play *Chasing the Money*, which premiered in 1999. Moving to the novel format allowed Dennis to develop the characters from his relatively short play and explore them more fully. Before writing the play, he did extensive research, talking to all sorts of people whose lives are affected by gambling: teens who are addicted to gambling, adult gamblers, families of people with gambling addictions, and those who work with recovering gamblers.

Dennis now spends the majority of his working time writing screenplays, although he still manages to find the time for some theater work and producing.

The following activity ideas ...

... are only a start. There are many possibilities for helping students construct meaning from text.

Comprehension activities:

- help readers to extend their general knowledge from prior experience
- develop reading strategies for comprehension
- bring relevance to the act of reading
- foster discussion and reflection through response to the text and illustrations

Before

STARTING THE BOOK

Activities to set the tone or introduce the topic of the book, establish prior knowledge and interest, and develop predictions of what the text will be about.

A 1. Post on a chart the following quote from *Double or Nothing*, page 21:

“If I can do it, anybody can. Because you make your luck. You make it happen. And once you’re on a roll, magic keeps coming into your life.”

This is a quote from the main character in the book: Kip, a teenager in high school. Without mentioning the book’s topic of gambling addiction, lead a discussion asking for reactions to the quote with questions such as:

- What kind of person talks like this?
- What point are they trying to make?
- Have you heard this message in other ways from someone you’ve met?
- What sort of friendship would you expect if you knew this person?

A 2. This novel is about a teenager’s need to gamble. Ask the students to develop a definition of gambling and, through discussion and research, ask questions such as:

- Is there a difference between the dictionary and legal definitions of gambling according to the federal, state or provincial laws?
- What is the legal age for gambling? Is it different in other countries?
- What is the difference between informal gambling (a friendly bet), legal gambling (VLT—video lottery terminal) and illegal gambling (uncensored betting)?
- What is the difference between a habit and an addiction?

READING THE BOOK

Activities to check on comprehension, stimulate interest, involve readers in reflection as they read, and encourage consideration of other readers' reactions.

- B 1. As the students are reading, pause at the quote from page 21 and reflect on the prior discussion about the character Kip. Lead discussion with questions such as:
- How does the novel's narrative style in the first person add to our understanding of Kip's character?
- Return to this discussion when reading page 125.
- Has Kip's attitude changed or is it still the same when he once again describes his approach to life at the end of chapter 15?
 - When in the story does Kip's habit become an addiction?
- B 2. As the students are reading, keep a running list of certain phrases in the text that reflect the vocabulary of a teenager rather than an adult, for example "teflons right off me" (page 1). Keep discussion ongoing about choices of vocabulary when writing dialogue that establishes a character's age:
- What does each phrase mean?
 - Are these phrases familiar to you?
 - Could you say the same thing but in another way?
- Ask the students to:
- Interview adults who were teenagers in the 60s, 70s, etc.
 - Report back on two or three phrases that were common for each generation.
 - Predict phrases for which their generation of teenagers will be remembered.

READING THE BOOK

Activities to inspire continued reflection and response to the text, bring conclusion to the experience of reading this particular text, and stimulate further extensions.

- C 1. There are several examples in the book where Kip's attitude to others in a particular circumstance is not the same as when he finds himself in the same situation. Have students look at the panhandling described on page 8 and later on page 161, or consider the description of using the slot machines on page 18 and later on page 107.
- Why do you think Kip doesn't see the similarities in himself?
 - Have you seen a problem that someone else is in but they can't see it themselves?
 - What have you done about it?
- C 2. There are many support networks and programs that help teenagers deal with addictions. Assign students to find a Web site or agency that can provide factual information and ideas about the problem of addictions, and of gambling in particular.
- What are the warning signs of addiction in Kip?
 - What actions could have been taken by other characters to prevent it?

Role-play a scenario where one student is Kip and the other student is another character in the book. Working in pairs, have "Kip" face up to his addiction and take steps to recover. The other student must be convincing, remembering what a confident talker Kip is yet how much help he really needs.

After five minutes, switch roles for another five minutes.

Next, lead a discussion about what worked or didn't work in talking to "Kip". Interview the students playing "Kip" in character about how they felt and what strategies got through to them and which ones didn't.

Assign a task to design an effective message warning teenagers about gambling and display the results through the Guidance Department.