

WHAT COMES NEXT

Historical • Ethical • Cultural Context Packet

CENTRAL IDEA

What does it actually take to heal from a loss so big that words stop working — and why might silence sometimes say more than speech?

Novel: What Comes Next by Rob Buyea

Setting: A present-day New England town

Designed for: Advanced readers in grades 4–6, with adaptable supports

TEXT USE

Use a teacher-approved copy of the complete novel. This resource supplies original prompts and no reproduced passages.

How to Use This Packet

This novel touches real psychological and cultural territory: trauma responses, childhood grief, animal companionship, and American Sign Language. Read for source authority, purpose, and limits, and never use these files to diagnose a real person.

Accuracy safeguard

Thea and her experience are fictional. The psychological patterns this packet describes (trauma-related mutism, grief, survivor's guilt) are real and documented, but they look different in every real person. Use this content to interpret the novel, not to label any actual student.

Source Routine

- Identify the authoring institution and its expertise.
- Separate fact, interpretation, and speculation.
- Ask what the source can establish and what it cannot.
- Record access date and exact URL.

1. Trauma Responses and Mutism: What Real Psychology Says

Selective mutism and trauma-related speech withdrawal are real, recognized conditions, most often understood as an anxiety response rather than a deliberate choice; they can be triggered or worsened by witnessing a frightening or traumatic event, and typically require patient, low-pressure support rather than insistence on speaking.

Inquiry question

Which of Thea's behaviors match this real pattern, and how does that change your view of the adults who pressure her to talk?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

2. Grief in Children: What Research Actually Shows

Researchers who study childhood grief have found that children process loss differently than adults, often moving in and out of grief rather than through fixed stages, and that healing timelines vary enormously from child to child with no single “normal” pace.

Inquiry question

How does this research complicate the idea that a fresh start should fix Thea's grief on any particular schedule?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

3. Animal-Assisted Support: What the Research Says

Research on animal companionship and therapy animals has found real, documented benefits for stress and emotional regulation in many people, though results vary by individual, and reputable sources caution that an animal is a support, not a substitute for professional care when it's needed.

Inquiry question

What does Jack-Jack provide for Thea that this research would predict, and what does the novel suggest an animal alone cannot do?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

4. American Sign Language and Deaf Culture

American Sign Language (ASL) is a complete, complex language with its own grammar, distinct from spoken English, used within a rich Deaf community and culture; it is not simply a translated or simplified version of English gestures.

Inquiry question

How does treating sign language as a full language, rather than a workaround, change your reading of Rory teaching it to Thea?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

5. The Real Psychology of Survivor's Guilt

Survivor's guilt — the real, documented experience of guilt after surviving an event that harmed or killed someone else — is a recognized response following accidents, disasters, and other shared traumatic events, and is now understood as a common, treatable part of grief rather than a sign of wrongdoing.

Inquiry question
How does this concept help explain Thea's guilt and nightmares, without treating them as something shameful?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

6. Writing Grief for Young Readers: A Craft Lens

Authors who write about serious topics like grief for young readers face a real craft challenge: balancing emotional honesty with hope, in a way that neither minimizes real pain nor overwhelms readers. Professional reviewers of this novel have offered mixed opinions about how well it strikes that balance, with some praising its warmth and others finding certain plot turns too tidy.

Inquiry question
Where do you agree or disagree with published reviewers about how well this novel balances honesty and hope?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

Curated Starting Sources

Source	Use	Caution
A reputable mental health organization's page on selective mutism	Accurate, non-diagnostic overview of a real condition	General overview; never use to label a real student.
A reputable childhood grief and bereavement organization	Real research on how children experience and process loss	General patterns; individual grief varies widely.
Pet Partners or a similar animal-assisted therapy organization	Documented research on animal companionship and support	Describes general benefits; not a claim about every animal or situation.
National Association of the Deaf: information on ASL and Deaf culture	Authoritative, respectful information on ASL as a full language	Represents the Deaf community's own perspective; treat with care and respect.

Source Evaluation & Synthesis

Source / Access Date	Authority & Purpose	Claim Supported	Limit / Corroboration

Fact–Inference–Judgment Check

FACT I can verify:

INFERENCE I draw:

JUDGMENT I defend:

Historical Accuracy & Ethics Audit

- ☐ I never use this packet's content to diagnose or label a real student.
- ☐ I present trauma-related mutism and grief as real, documented, and highly individual experiences.
- ☐ I treat American Sign Language as a full, complex language, not a simplified workaround.
- ☐ I distinguish empirical claims (psychological research) from ethical claims (how to treat someone who is grieving).
- ☐ I represent published critical opinions of the novel fairly, including both praise and fair critique.
- ☐ I cite exact sources and access dates.

Synthesis Question

Which context lens most changes your view of what actually helps Thea heal — and where does the story resist that lens?
