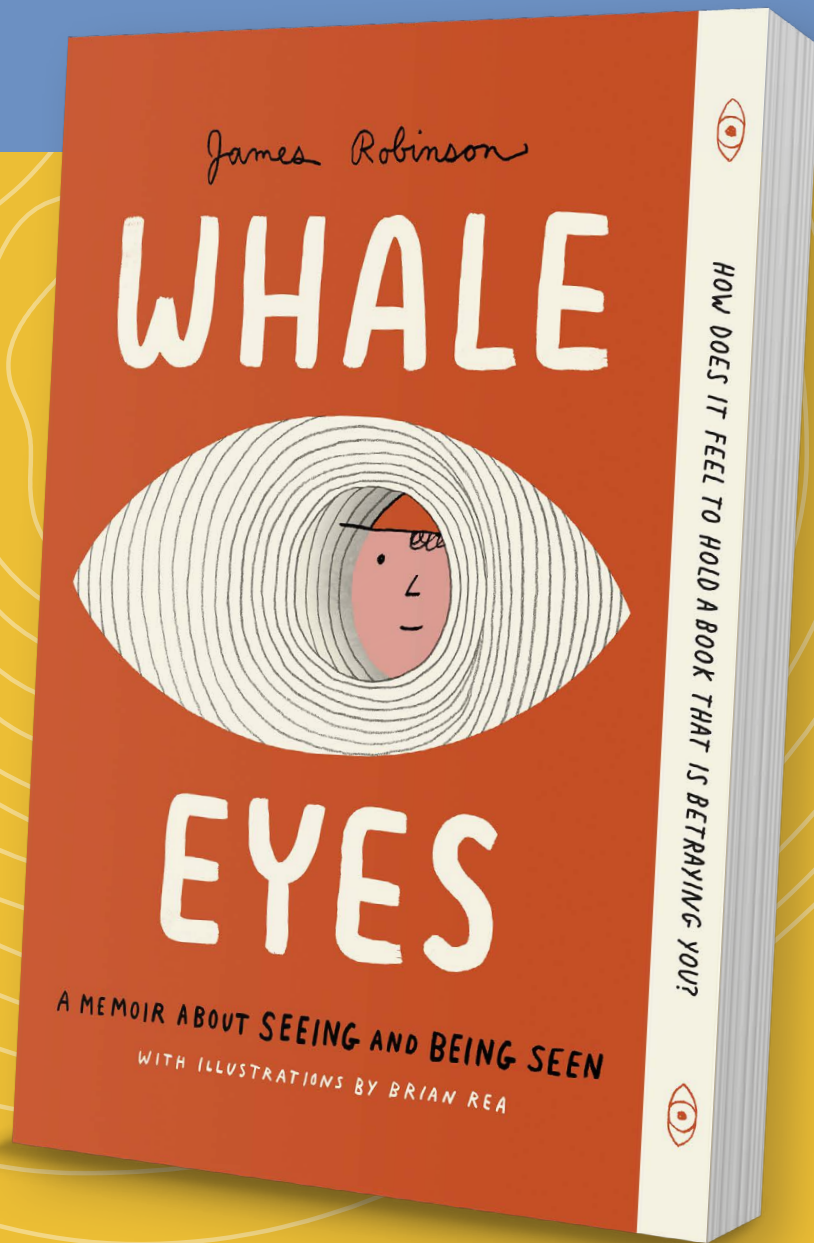


# AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO



★ "A GAME-CHANGING CURRICULUM ADD for any teacher looking to motivate creatives in their classroom."

—THE BULLETIN OF THE CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S BOOKS, STARRED REVIEW



# PRAISE FOR WHALE EYES

A SCHNEIDER FAMILY BOOK AWARD YOUNG ADULT WINNER

AN NCTE ORBIS PICTUS RECOMMENDED BOOK

AN ALA ALSC NOTABLE SELECTION

A MISSOURI DOGWOOD NONFICTION READING LIST SELECTION

A PENNSYLVANIA MOUNTAIN LAUREL BOOK AWARD SELECTION

★ “EXCEPTIONALLY WELL-DONE . . .  
Robinson’s prose is conversational and  
seemingly light, yet it will leave readers  
with plenty of substance to ponder . . .  
CHAMPIONS EMPATHY AND  
UNDERSTANDING ON EVERY LEVEL.”

—BOOKPAGE,  
STARRED REVIEW

★ “An ACCESSIBLE AND IMMERSIVE  
account of growing up with strabismus,  
a condition of eye misalignment . . .  
Robinson presents a sincere reflection  
on childhood experiences  
of growing up in a world not built  
with him in mind.”

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY,  
STARRED REVIEW

★ “This LIVELY,  
INTERACTIVE . . .  
HEARTFELT MEMOIR IS  
TRULY EYE-OPENING and  
will encourage readers to  
seek out his other works.”

—BOOKLIST,  
STARRED REVIEW

★ “A GAME-CHANGING  
CURRICULUM ADD for  
any teacher looking  
to motivate creatives  
in their classroom.”

—THE BULLETIN OF THE CENTER  
FOR CHILDREN’S BOOKS,  
STARRED REVIEW

★ “With Rea’s affecting  
and mesmerizing line  
drawings, this is  
AN IMPORTANT BOOK  
for all readers.”

—SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL,  
STARRED REVIEW

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR

Susie Post-Rust



**JAMES ROBINSON** is an Emmy Award–winning documentary filmmaker and video producer for *New York Times* Opinion. James speaks to audiences across the country, from grade school to grad school, about disability, filmmaking, and getting people to care. Visit him online at [byjamesrobinson.com](http://byjamesrobinson.com).



**BRIAN REA** produces drawings and paintings for books, magazines, murals, fashion, and film projects around the world. He is the weekly illustrator for the *New York Times* column *Modern Love*. He is an adjunct associate professor at Art Center College of Design and a member of Alliance Graphique Internationale. His first authored book, *Death Wins a Goldfish* (Chronicle Books), was nominated for an Eisner Award and was optioned for television. Visit him online at [brianrea.com](http://brianrea.com).

This guide was written by Sarah Mulhern Gross. Sarah is a high school English teacher and National Board Certified teacher in Lincroft, New Jersey. She has an MAT degree in teaching biology from Project Dragonfly and Miami University. She is a contributor to *the New York Times* Learning Network, and her writing has appeared in *Scientific American*, *ASCD*, the *New Jersey English Journal*, and the *Washington Post*’s Answer Sheet. Sarah has presented for NCTE, NJCTE, NJCEL, NJEA, the *New York Times* Learning Network, Fordham University’s Summer Literacy Institute, the Center for Teaching Excellence, and the New Jersey Science Teachers Association. She is the cofounder of #nerdcampNJ, a past NJCTE vice president, and a past faculty board member for CuriousScienceWriters, which provides a platform for publishing student science writing.

# INTRODUCTION

**JAMES ROBINSON**, Emmy Award-winning filmmaker, was born with misaligned eyes, also known as strabismus. While his vision is 20/20, his eyes send separate images to his brain, which struggles to fuse them together. In his memoir and documentary film, he helps readers and viewers see the world through his eyes. In a creative, interactive memoir format, Robinson invites readers to experience reading as he did. A once-dreaded activity for him, he has created a reading experience for anyone interested in disability representation, connection, and understanding.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 *Whale Eyes* is a memoir unlike any other. Beginning on the first page, James Robinson's writing and Brian Rea's illustrations simulate some of the visual challenges Robinson faces. What was your experience reading the book? Was it difficult? Easier than other books you've read? Did you feel the non-traditional format helped you connect with Robinson's experiences?
- 2 Throughout the memoir, Robinson talks to his readers. He asks them to read upside down, track letters up and down the page, and much more. What was this experience like for you? How does it feel to be addressed by the author? Robinson often refers to people as stargers: Why does he do this? Are you a starger?
- 3 James Robinson often discusses situations in which it feels like others can accomplish things more easily than he can. List some of the examples of these situations in the book. Have you ever experienced a situation where it felt like something—a sport, a subject in school, a social situation—was easier for other people? What did that feel like? How did you get through it?
- 4 Throughout the memoir, James Robinson discusses some of the ways he adapts to fit in or avoid drawing attention to himself, especially at school. Think about your life: What kinds of adaptations have you made to participate in school or extracurricular activities?
- 5 On p. 165, Robinson introduces readers to his family's rallying cry: "There's no such thing as later." Explain what this means in his family, and then think about your own family. Are there common phrases you say in order to inspire each other? What are they, and when do you use them?
- 6 When he was a college senior, James Robinson began to think he would need to address his misaligned eyes when applying for jobs. This is an example of a disability tax—an extra cost people with disabilities are burdened with in order to help other people understand them or feel more comfortable. In Robinson's case, he hoped the video would allow him to address his disability once and then move on. This thought, which eventually led to the documentary *Whale Eyes*, is a snapshot of the disability experience for many people. How does this make you feel? Can you think of other instances of a disability tax?
- 7 On p. 198, Robinson explains how misaligned eyes often act as shorthand for film or TV characters being disconnected from those around them. He writes, "The use of strabismus to connote danger, fear, and alien-like behavior has been around since the inception of the film industry." Have you ever noticed this? List the examples Robinson gives and any others you can think of. Are there other disabilities society uses as shorthand for something else? How does this make you feel?

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

- 8 Robinson explains (p. 201) that in the early 2000s, scientists began studying the impact of strabismus on those who encounter others with misaligned eyes. What did these scientists learn? Why is this knowledge important? How can you use this information in your life?
- 9 On page 225, Robinson laments that “Documentarians have an issue. There is simply too much to care about. How do you slim the world down? How do you give someone a gift that they can actually carry with them? How do you make caring portable?” Imagine that you were given the opportunity to make a documentary about something you care about. What would it be about? What techniques would you use to get viewers to care about the topic as much as you do?
- 10 “I don’t have a problem with the way I see,” Robinson states in his *New York Times* Opinion Video. “My only problem is with the way I’m seen.” After reading the book, explain what this means. What is the difference between the way a person sees and the way they are seen?

## IDEAS FOR TEACHING

### DOCUMENTARY VS. MEMOIR

Before it was a memoir, [Whale Eyes](#) was an Emmy Award-nominated short documentary. In an [interview](#) with *Duke Today*, Robinson explained:

“Four years into my Duke experience, I was feeling pretty comfortable behind the camera—but in front of it, where my visual disability shone bright for all to see, I was nervous, scared and unsure of myself. In my final semester at Duke, I took Chris Sims’ capstone Doc Studies class, where I found a comfortable environment, conducive to taking personal risk. It gave me the opportunity to explore this disability from all angles and in all of its emotions—playful, serious, jovial, somber, and most importantly—vulnerable. I began by working with archival footage, then interviewed my family, and wove these aspects together with footage that I shot both at Duke, and later, after virtual learning began, in my home.”

The first draft of the film was twenty-three minutes long. It was then picked up by the *New York Times*, and Robinson worked with an editor to create the twelve-minute version later nominated for an Emmy Award.

After reading the memoir and watching the documentary, have students plan and write an analytical essay comparing and contrasting the two mediums. They should clearly identify and explain major similarities and differences using at least three of these four features: sensory experience, focus, pacing, and structure.



# IDEAS FOR TEACHING (CONTINUED)

## SCIENCE COMMUNICATION: REFLECTING ON ACCOMMODATIONS AND ACCESSIBILITY

On pages 204–205, Robinson explains that there is more than one name doctors could use to describe his condition. While this allows for the medical community to be more specific, he says,

“These names are useful, but they were designed to serve a specific community—or the medical community. The terms are crucial when providing treatment or working through scientific papers. But I wasn’t living in a scientific paper.”

Robinson is describing the importance of [science communication](#), a way of sharing scientific information with the general public. Science communication takes high-level, specialized information and “translates” it for people who are not experts. It is an important tool for any scientist. The Artemis II astronauts were tasked with communicating science to the whole world on their mission, so NASA hired poets, writers, and artists to help them train. That’s how vital science communication is!

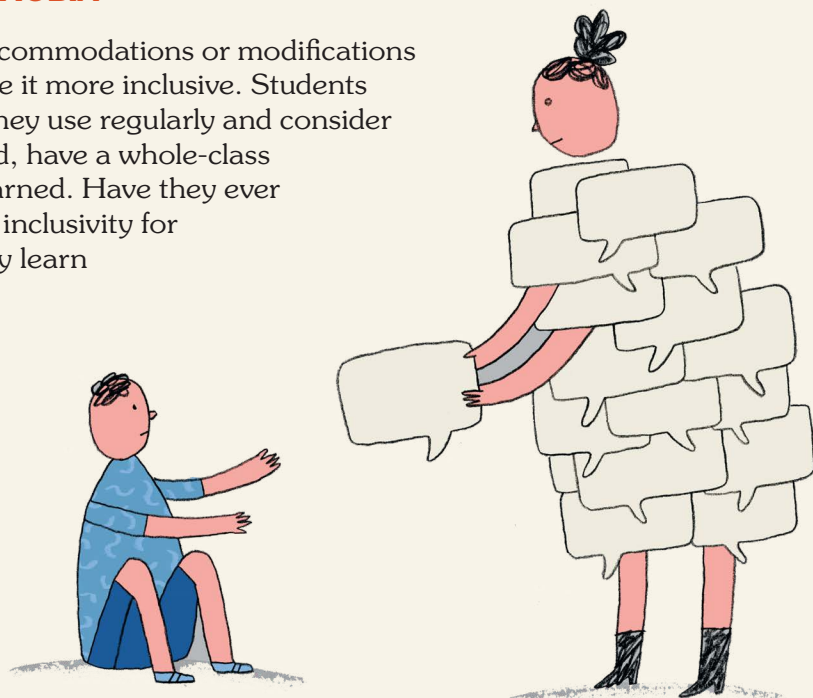
[CuriousScienceWriters](#) is an extracurricular program for high school students interested in learning about science communication. As part of the program, high school students research and write about breaking science news on the program’s [website](#). Many of the articles deal with medicine, neurodiversity, and disabilities.

Break students into groups and ask them to explore a few of the articles. As they peruse the articles, students should note their thoughts and questions.

After spending 15–20 minutes looking over the website, ask each group to reflect on how the website might be accessible (or not) to someone like James Robinson. They might consider the experience of people with:

- LOW VISION/BLINDNESS
- COLOR BLINDNESS
- DYSLEXIA
- CONTRAST SENSITIVITY
- PHOTOPHOBIA

Ask students to brainstorm accommodations or modifications to the website that would make it more inclusive. Students could then choose a website they use regularly and consider the same questions. Afterward, have a whole-class discussion about what they learned. Have they ever had to think about access and inclusivity for websites before? What did they learn from this activity?



# IDEAS FOR TEACHING (CONTINUED)

## ACCESSIBILITY AUDIT

For many students, accessibility is an afterthought unless it is a part of their daily needs. For this activity, ask students to complete an accessibility audit of the school building. What barriers exist for students with disabilities? What improvements could be made? For example, is there an elevator in the building? Remind students that even if no one needs an elevator today, a temporary disability, such as a broken leg, could mean a student or staff member requires an accommodation.

Take a walk with your students. Give students the following list to keep in mind as they examine the school building:

### 1 MOBILITY/PHYSICAL ACCESS

- a. Are there steps?
- b. Is there enough room for a wheelchair to maneuver the classrooms, library, and gym?
- c. Are bathrooms and water fountains accessible?

### 2 VISUAL ACCESS

- a. Are Braille signs available?
- b. Is lighting sufficient and appropriate?

### 3 AUDITORY ACCESS

- a. Are assistive listening devices available?
- b. Is the background noise too overpowering for someone with hearing aids or trouble focusing?
- c. Do alarms (like fire alarms) include visual and auditory cues?

### 4 SENSORY ACCESS

- a. Does the school have a sensory room?
- b. Are all lights fluorescent? These can trigger migraines or sensory overload for some people.

### 5 OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- a. If the school has a playground, is it accessible to all students, regardless of abilities?
- b. Is physical education class accessible? Are games adaptable?
- c. Does the curriculum include disability representation and lessons?

After students complete the audit, have a class discussion. What did they notice? How do they feel? How can they help make their school more inclusive and accessible?

Encourage students to take what they have learned and create posters, school announcements, a social media campaign, or letters to the board of education that promote inclusion and disability rights.



# IDEAS FOR TEACHING (CONTINUED)

## SCHNEIDER FAMILY BOOK AWARD

Awarded annually by the American Library Association, the Schneider Family Book Award honors books for children and young adults that “feature a main or secondary character with a disability and must portray disability as part of a full life, and information on disability,” portraying “disability as part of a full life” with accurate information on disability. There is no one singular experience when discussing a disability, but in many curricula there is a distinct lack of representation for disabled and neurodivergent people. *Whale Eyes* is a Schneider Family Book Award winner and one of many incredible books to have received this honor.

Read James Robinson’s [acceptance speech](#) for the Schneider Family Book Award with students. Discuss and analyze the speech with students.

Broaden your classroom library by using the [list](#) of Schneider Family Book Award winners and honor books to create book clubs or a whole-class reading experience for students.

### *THE WAR THAT SAVED MY LIFE*

by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley

### *FISH IN A TREE*

by Lynda Mullaly Hunt

### *YOU'RE WELCOME, UNIVERSE*

by Whitney Gardner

### *CURSED*

by Karol Ruth Silverstein

### *GET A GRIP, VIVY COHEN!*

by Sarah Kapit

### *THE WORDS WE KEEP*

by Erin Stewart

### *LOUDER THAN HUNGER*

by John Schu

