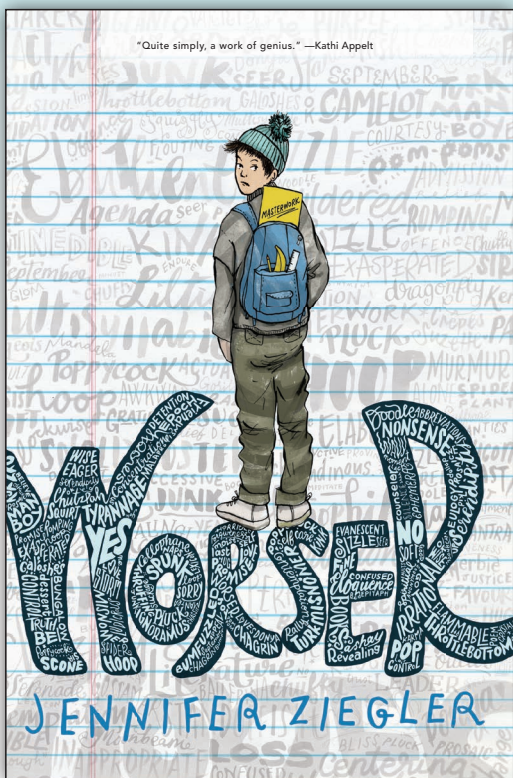


# HOLIDAY HOUSE EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

Grades  
4—7

MARGARET FERGUSON BOOKS  
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## Worser

by Jennifer Ziegler

### ABOUT THE BOOK

**A bullied 12-year-old boy must find a new normal after his mother has a stroke and his life is turned upside down.**

William Wyatt Orser, a socially awkward middle schooler, is a wordsmith who, much to his annoyance, acquired the ironically ungrammatical nickname of “Worser” so long ago that few people at school know to call him anything else.

Worser grew up with his mom, a professor of rhetoric and an introvert just like him, in a comfortable routine that involved reading aloud in the evenings, criticizing the grammar of others, ignoring the shabby mess of their house, and suffering the bare minimum of social interactions with others. But recently all that has changed. His mom had a stroke that left her nonverbal, and his Aunt Iris has moved in with her cats, art projects, loud music, and even louder clothes.

Feeling lost, lonely, and overwhelmed, Worser searches for a new sanctuary and ends up finding the Literary Club—a group of kids from school who share his love of words and meet in a used bookstore—something he never dreamed existed outside of his home. Even more surprising to Worser is that the key to making friends is sharing the thing he holds dearest: his Masterwork, the epic word notebook that he has been adding entries to for years. But relationships can be precarious, and it is up to Worser to turn the page in his own story to make something that endures so that he is no longer seen as Worser and earns a new nickname, Worder.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- William Wyatt Orser is in the seventh grade at Oak Valley Middle School. Cite evidence that he isn't a typical seventh grader. How do the school administrators expect him to conform? What is Will's passion?
- Describe Donya Khoury. Explain how Principal Ludlum reacts to her when she protests the closing of the library. Describe her passion. Why is it so difficult for school administrators to deal with “passionate” students?
- Worser is a loner. Explain why he has trouble relating to his peers. Describe his relationship with Herbie. How do they need one another? Why isn't Worser interested in seeing Herbie outside of school?
- Describe Worser's home life before his mother's stroke. Aunt Iris, his mother's sister, moves in to care for his mother after the stroke. What changes does she make to the Orser household?



- Discuss Worser’s opinion of Aunt Iris. Explain his anger when Aunt Iris tries to parent him. How does Worser feel as out of place at home as he does at school? Discuss the shame he feels when he starts referring to his mother in third person.
- How did Will get the nickname “Worser”? He is invited to dinner at the Khourys’. How does Dr. Khoury react when Donya calls Will “Worser”? Why does Will accept the nickname when he doesn’t like it?
- Discuss why Aunt Iris calls him “Potato.” How does this nickname connote many different things?
- By the end of the novel, Worser acquires the nickname “Worder.” How is this a more appropriate nickname for him? Debate whether Aunt Iris will change the nickname she uses for him.
- Aunt Iris practices yoga and meditation. Discuss what she means by “Meditate on the concept of letting go. How we often hold onto things we shouldn’t, or hold onto things too tightly, when it’s far better to surrender our grasp” (p.53). What is Worser holding onto? Explain how he surrenders his grasp by the end of the novel.
- Describe Worser’s Masterwork. How is it an obsession with him? Since the library is closed, he must find another place to work after school. Discuss how he finds Re-Visions, the used bookstore.
- What is the arrangement he makes with Mr. Murray, the owner? Worser compares Mr. Murray to his mother before she had the stroke. Explain the following metaphor: If they were fonts, she (his mother) would be Helvetica and he (Mr. Murray) Courier. Assign a font to Worser. How does Mr. Murray grow to like Worser?
- Worser speaks with Mr. Murray about letting the Literary Club meet at the store. Explain the arrangement the two make. What is Worser’s contribution to the club? How does the group react to Worser’s Masterwork? Explain the change that Worser feels after he becomes part of the Literary Club. How do they give him a sense of belonging?
- Worser has a crush on Donya Khoury. Discuss his reaction when he sees Donya and Turk in an embrace. How is jealousy a “new” emotion for Worser? At what point is it apparent that Donya wants him as a friend, but not as a boyfriend.
- Worser learns that Re-Visions is closing. How does he enlist the Literary Club to help save the bookstore? Explain why Worser lights the fire. He tells Mr. Murray, “My counselor says that anger is how some people deal with fear” (p. 240). What is Worser’s greatest fear?
- Explain the change Mr. Murray sees in Worser after the fire. How is Worser dealing with his mother’s disability in a different way? How does his relationship with Aunt Iris change?

Guide created by Pat Scales, retired school librarian and independent consultant, Greenville, South Carolina.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Photo Credit: Sam Bond



**Jennifer Ziegler** is an author of books for young adults and middle graders, including *How Not to Be Popular*, *Revenge of the Flower Girls*, *Revenge of the Teacher’s Pets*, and *Worser*. She is on the faculty of Vermont College of Fine Arts’ MFA program on Writing for Children and Young Adults. Like *Worser*, she is a lover of words, word play, puzzles, libraries, and bookstores. Unlike *Worser*, she was never sent to the principal’s office. Jennifer lives in Austin, Texas, with her husband, author Chris Barton. Visit her at [JenniferZiegler.com](http://JenniferZiegler.com).



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