

Kicks

by **Janet Fitch (excerpt)**

Illustrated by **Walter Askin**

Curriculum developed by **Rosalind Helfand** and **Tiffany Owens**

Supplementary curriculum and copy editing by **Léna Garcia**



OVERVIEW

Quick Glance 10 Points for Usage Guide

Student Population	
Age/Grade Level Appropriateness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ages 14+ • Grades 9+
Genre/s	Fiction
Length	3,734 words
Content Advisories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Some mention of sex and sexuality * One character has brain damage
One Sentence Summary	Teenage Laurie, a child of Russian-speaking immigrants, struggles to find her identity while dealing with family challenges, including her disabled father, pressure from her mother, and her high-achieving brother.

Lesson Planning	
Topic/s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Disability * Identity * Family * First generation Americans * The Russian-speaking immigrant experience * Fitting in
Key Theme/s Overview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Seeing family differently as you age * Dealing with pressure to succeed * The need to fit in with peers * Surviving one's teen years * The transition from childhood to adulthood
Historic Events / Time Period for Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * 1990s Los Angeles/Hollywood * Immigration of former Soviet Republic immigrants to the Los Angeles area
Complementary Classic and Historic Texts	Poem: "The Aliens" by Charles Bukowski

Lesson Planning	
Author and Artists Information	<p>Janet Fitch is an author living in Los Angeles, California.</p> <p>Walter Askin is an artist living in Pasadena, California.</p>

Key Common Core Standards (found in detail following the curriculum)	<p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4.A, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.5, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.7, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.A, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.2</p>
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Author Biography

Janet Fitch is the author of the novels *Paint It Black* and *White Oleander*, an Oprah book club selection. Her short stories have appeared in anthologies and journals, such as *Los Angeles Noir*, *Black Clock*, *Room of One's Own*, and *Black Warrior Review*. She teaches creative writing at the Community of Writers at Squaw Valley. Currently, she is finishing a novel set during the Russian Revolution. A feature film based on her novel *Paint It Black* was directed by Amber Tamblyn.

Artist Biography

Walter Askin came to art via a series of subterfuges and coyote-like meanderings, holds the world record for breaking the picture plane more than 293 times in a 24-hour period, and recently appeared on Hawaiian television between the most beautiful baby in Hawaii contest and some dancing elephants. He was a four-letter man in high school — screen printing, bronze sculpture, oil painting, and figure drawing. (His school did not field a team in watercolor.)

SYNOPSIS

Laurie is a teenager living in Hollywood with her hard-working, demanding mother, who supports the entire family, her older brother, whose academic achievements are difficult to live up to, and her father,

who is unable to communicate in a meaningful way with Laurie. These challenges are the result of a terrible hit-and-run accident, which left her father permanently cognitively disabled, robbing him of his career as a successful academic at Pasadena’s California Institute of Technology, and dramatically altering the family’s socio-economic status. Increasingly, Laurie feels the pressures of her home life. Longing to both find her own identity and fit in with friends from school, Laurie will soon have important decisions to make about her life. This short-fiction piece is an excerpt from Janet Fitch’s novel by the same title, *Kicks*.

CURRICULUM

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

Topic

In Leo Tolstoy’s novel, *Anna Karenina*, he writes, “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Consider this quote as you discuss the questions below. Do you agree or disagree with it?

Hold a class discussion about the concept of the “perfect family.” Brainstorm a list of qualities of a “perfect family.” Do you know any families with all of these qualities? Is a “perfect family” realistic? Discuss.

Main Ideas

As a class, discuss the concept of identity. What does it mean? Write down students’ ideas as they discuss concepts such as individual versus family identity, cultural identity, and self-image.

Then ask students to describe their own identities in their journals. As they write, they should consider the following: how their identities are different now that they aren’t young children; how they see themselves as like and unlike their family members; and what aspects of their lives are important to their identities — academics, religion, etc.

Identity (self-identity): Identity is a person’s conception and expression of their own and others’ individuality or group affiliations (such as national identity and cultural identity). A psychological identity relates to self-image (one’s mental model of oneself), self-esteem, and individuality. Self-identity can also relate to gender, ethnicity, academic performance, and one’s concept or collection of beliefs about oneself.

Cultural Identity: Cultural identity is the identity or feeling of belonging to — as part of the self-conception and self-perception— nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality, and any

kind of social group with its own distinct culture. In this way, cultural identity is both characteristic of the individual and of any group whose members share the same cultural identity.

Passage-Specific Themes

Ask students to read the following passage from *Kicks*:

“Her mother said Laurie was a lot like [her father] used to be, always imagining what if. Lena wasn’t like that at all. She had a mind like a railroad track. It went from here to there in the most efficient manner possible. She never considered that there might be other places to go, other ways to get there.”

Do you ever feel like who you really are is different from how other people perceive you? Write in your journal about why or why not, and explain the differences between the person you are and how people see you.

Universal Themes

In *Kicks*, Laurie’s mother is worried that Laurie’s friends will negatively influence her.

Conduct a class discussion about peer pressure. Peer pressure is the influence that a group of people, observers, or an individual exert that encourages others to change their attitudes, values, or behaviors to conform to the group.

How have students in the class experienced peer pressure? What is negative peer pressure? Is there such a thing as positive peer pressure? Explore this subject.

Key Vocabulary

Definitions are very context-dependent. Make sure that any definitions you look up or work from are the ones that most correctly fit in the context of the story.

Level One	Level Two	Level Three
drooling	high-tops	self-combust
whirled	falafel	post-doctoral
socked	ineffectualness	totalitarian
doubly	gnawing	sanguine

Level One	Level Two	Level Three
dense	eventually	sanguinary
bungalow	Bougainvillea	satrap
hideously	aquamarine	sangfroid
slung	shell (of a man)	waitlisted
solitaire	mathematician	defrocked
curb	fellow (at a university)	Nobel Prize
faded	master's (degree)	
hand-me-downs	dreary	
bangle	threadbare	
hassled	colonel	
stashed	Lincoln (Abraham)	
disgusted	paprika	
typical	brainwashed	
hysterically	democratic	
sighed	fuses	
conservatively	Phillips-head screwdriver	
scowling	needle-nosed pliers	
proton	leering	
nucleus	smarmy	
ridiculous	mutant	
cram (school)	titanium	
perched	geek	
kicks	bookkeeper	
	scrubwoman	
	housedress	
	surgical precision	
	crotchety	
	arrowhead	

Vocabulary Activities

1. In *Kicks*, Laurie is studying vocabulary words for the PSAT by making up stories that include the words. Read the following passage from the story: “Laurie sighed and started on the vocabulary lists. She studied them by writing a story using all the words in each little section. “The sanguine grin on the face of the sanguinary satrap was in contrast to his customary sangfroid.” Look up the meanings of the four words that Laurie used: sanguine, sanguinary, satrap, and sangfroid. Now make up your own short story using these words. Share your story either in groups or with the class.
2. In *Kicks*, Laurie is under pressure from her mother and brother to be a high academic achiever. Her parents were graduate students, and her brother is focused on going to the “best” university. The following words relating to academia are mentioned in the story: cram, waitlisted, mathematician, Master’s degree, fellow, post-doctoral, and Nobel Prize. Look up and write down the meanings of these words. Be careful! Some have multiple meanings.

You have found the academic meanings. Now conduct an Internet search and complete the following exercises:

1. Find a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree program you find interesting.
2. Find a scholarship or fellowship you can imagine applying for.
3. Find a Nobel Prize winner; write about when and for what they won their prize. Report on your findings. Pair up with a classmate to share your responses.
4. Laurie refers to her home life as “totalitarian” instead of “democratic.” Write a short essay in which you discuss the differences between a totalitarian and a democratic government. Secondary option: Do you concur with Laurie’s assessment of her home life as totalitarian? Why or why not? Whether in discussion or in writing, cite textual evidence.

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

1. Laurie says she doesn’t understand how her mother can still be in love with her father. Why does Laurie find this so difficult to understand, and why do you think her mother is still in love with her father? What do you imagine you might feel for a loved one who changes suddenly, as Laurie’s father?
2. Do you ever feel that your abilities are underestimated by other people? Write down an ability for which you don’t get enough credit. Now, discuss in class what it is and why you’re better at it than people suspect.
3. What is peer pressure? How is Laurie experiencing peer pressure in *Kicks*? Do you think it’s positive, negative, or both? Explain.

4. What does it mean to make a personal sacrifice? Has Laurie’s mother made a personal sacrifice on behalf of her children? Who do you know in real life who has made a personal sacrifice for their family? Could you make such a sacrifice? Why or why not?

Text-Dependent Questions

1. The story you read was an excerpt from a novel. When it ends, it is unclear what happens next. What do you think happens next? Cite evidence from earlier in the story — clues or foreshadowing — to support your thoughts.
2. Does Laurie have high or low self-esteem? What evidence can you find in the story that Laurie has good or poor self-esteem?
3. How would you characterize Laurie’s relationships with each of her three family members? Be careful to not describe Laurie’s relationships as she sees them, but as you, the reader, see them. Cite examples from the story to explain your characterizations.
4. How does being the child of immigrants shape Laurie’s own identity? How does being an immigrant shape her mother’s identity? Using examples from the text, compare and contrast Laurie and her mother in respect to their immigrant experience.
5. Analyze Carla and Laurie’s friendship. What’s in it for each of them? Are they similar? Different? Is Carla a good influence on Laurie or a bad influence, as Lena fears? Citing examples from the text, discuss the nature of Carla and Laurie’s friendship.
6. Having read the excerpt from *Kicks*, can you see a connection between the cover art and the story? What do you see? How would you describe the blonde character’s expression? Who from the story is she meant to be?
7. Laurie has mixed feelings about her mother. Describe those mixed feelings in detail. What evidence shows that Laurie admires as much as she resents her mother?

Writing Exercises

Narrative

The following passage details how Laurie’s father used to tell her stories in which everything was the opposite:

“He used to make up stories for her about a world that was the exact opposite of this one, where there was an opposite Laurie and an opposite Dad, where you got dressed to go to bed and brushed your teeth before you ate. In the opposite world, people smiled when they were sad and cried when they were happy, water ran uphill, and people were born old and grew young.”

Write your own short story that features a world where everything is the opposite of the world you know. You may focus on life at school, in your neighborhood, in your family, etc. Don't limit yourself!

Descriptive

We know how Laurie sees her brother, Murray. How does Murray view Laurie? Locate and re-read Laurie's internal monologue about Murray. When you're done, re-write the scene between Murray and Laurie but from Murray's viewpoint. Include Murray's internal monologue about Laurie.

Analysis

Laurie's experiencing a great deal of pressure from her mother to achieve academically. Is this a good thing? Write a research paper in which you analyze expert opinions on both the pros and the cons of parental pressure to succeed in school. Use articles from professional and academic journals from the psychology and educational worlds, analytical news articles from reputable publications, and other such sources.

Complementary Reading Text

The poem "Aliens" is by Charles Bukowski, a famous Los Angeles-born poet, novelist, and short story writer, who lived from 1920 to 1994.

Writing Exercise

Read the poem "Aliens" by Charles Bukowski. Discuss who "the aliens" are in the poem. Is this a poem Laurie in *Kicks* might write? Why or why not?

Write a brief essay analyzing how "The Aliens" could be a poem written by Laurie. Cite examples from the poem and the story to prove your points. What does Laurie say in the story that shows she shares Bukowski's point of view?

The Aliens

by Charles Bukowski

you may not believe it
but there are people
who go through life with
very little
friction of distress.

they dress well, sleep well.
they are contented with
their family
life.
they are undisturbed
and often feel
very good.
and when they die
it is an easy death, usually in their
sleep.
you may not believe
it
but such people do
exist.
but i am not one of
them.
oh no, I am not one of them,
I am not even near
to being
one of
them.
but they
are there
and I am
Here.

Activity Options

Classroom Activity One

Spend time studying the art created by Walter Askin for *Kicks*. Discuss the objects in the painting, the colors he chooses, and the expression and body language he uses to portray Laurie. Speculate on the messages he conveys with each of his artistic choices.

Now illustrate Laurie yourself in a drawing, using colored pencils, or in a painting. Portray her in a specific moment from the story. Just as the artist did, select a color palette, a set of objects, and body language with which to illustrate Laurie's mental state in your chosen moment.

Classroom Activity Two

In the story, Laurie's father is playing the card game solitaire. Ask students to each bring a deck of cards to school OR provide students with decks of cards. Teach them how to play classic solitaire at their desks, and have them spend quiet time playing the game.

After students have spent time playing solitaire, talk with them about the ways people focus and calm their thoughts through games like solitaire. Have students speculate in their journals as to why Laurie's father plays the game. What purpose might it have for him other than the fact that he remembers how to play it?

Home Activity

In *Kicks*, Laurie experiences intense, changing emotions — not an uncommon experience for teenagers. Ask students to read the following Teen Health article about changing emotions in kids and teens — it discusses life changes, as well as hormonal changes, as sources of emotional upheaval: http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/emotions/bad_mood.html# (http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/emotions/bad_mood.html#).

Ask students to create a Daily Emotional Chart at home. Students should use color coding and graphing techniques to chart both the intensity and type of emotion. For example, a student who feels happy in the morning can graph a high peak, colored in yellow, at 7 a.m. However, a student who feels down at 8 p.m. can graph a low peak, colored blue, for that time.

Students should chart their emotions for a week, then write an informal study analyzing their mood changes. What trends and other observations do they notice?

Students should turn in their charts with their reports.

Guest Speaker

Option 1: Connect with Los Angeles's Russian-speaking immigrant community. Invite a scientist or mathematician from the community to speak with your class about making life, career, and academic transitions from their home country to the United States. What challenges have they faced? What have been the rewards? Do they feel they successfully transitioned? Do they know people who were less successful?

Option 2: Invite to your class a psychiatrist who specializes in working with people who have suffered low to moderate brain damage in an accident. Ask them to speak about the challenges and rewards of their work, as well as what it is like to rehabilitate an accident victim. How do they assist a victim's family in coping with their loved one's new life?

Option 3: Both the author and illustrator are Los Angeles-area residents. Teachers are invited to work with *Literature for Life* to invite the author and/or illustrator to speak with the class about their work. Students should prepare questions in advance.

Field Trip

In *Kicks*, Laurie's father was a mathematics fellow at the California Institute of Technology (CalTech), and her mother was studying for a master's degree in physics. Organize a field trip to CalTech for students to tour and learn about the university. Be sure to visit the math and physics departments. Arrange in advance for professors to talk about what they study in each department and what life is like at CalTech.

Writing Exercise: After the trip, have students describe the CalTech campus from Laurie's father's point of view before his accident.

TEST PREPARATION COMPONENT

Activity:

Use a "double-bubble map" to compare and contrast Laurie and her older brother, Murray.

Instructions for double-bubble map: In the five bubbles connected only to Laurie's name, bullet note the key elements of her character. In the five bubbles stemming only from Murray's name, bullet note the key elements unique to his character. Use the center five bubbles to note similarities between the siblings.

Writing Prompt:

You are a Hollywood screenwriter tasked with adapting Janet Fitch's *Kicks* into a movie. Before casting actors to play Laurie and her family, you must write a one-paragraph character profile of each family member: Laurie, Murray, Lena, and Robert. Ask yourself, what is each character's goal? What is at stake for each character? What is each character good at? Where do they struggle? When creating Laurie and Murray's profiles, refer to the above mind map.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS REFERENCE

This story and its exercises are appropriate for 9-12th grade. Ninth-grade standards are cited.

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C: Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

Vocabulary Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grades 9-10 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4.A Use context (e.g., the overall meaning of a sentence, paragraph, or text; a word's position or function in a sentence) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.5 Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C: Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

Text-Dependent Question Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

Writing Exercise Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.A: Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D: Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Complementary Reading Text Writing Exercise

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6: Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.

Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.2: Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C: Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.