

# Section 1

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## Section Summary:

We are introduced to the narrator, Aven – a middle schooler who is a person that was born without arms. These opening chapters use humor to show the audience how Aven deals with peers and/or strangers reacting to her not having arms. It also sees Aven's life impacted by some big changes; family relocation to a new state, Aven moving into a theme park, and Aven starting at a new middle school. Aven also writes her first of six public blog posts about her life.

## Teacher Considerations:

Section 1 includes 8 chapters that vary in length from 4 to 9 pages.

Things to consider as we plan for successful student engagement with the resource:

1. Aven shares how when she was younger, she would lie by telling extreme stories about how she 'lost' her arms to her peers when they asked (includes stories about burns, animal attacks etc.) (pg. 4-5 )
2. Aven mentions conspiracy theories and anti-government sentiments (pg. 11 )
3. Aven tours her audience around the theme park including a 'fake jail' to pretend incarceration (pg. 26)
4. Aven encounters social isolation at her new school, eating in the bathroom, having peer interactions that reflect lack of belonging/acceptance (pg. 22, 40, etc.)

## Learning Intentions:

### Grade 6/7:

- I can Interpret and communicate ideas using symbols and elements to express meaning through the arts. (Art)
- I can explore and describe how personal identities adapt and change in different settings and situations. (PHE)

### Grade 8

- I can think critically, creatively, and reflectively to explore ideas within, between, and beyond text. (ELA)
- I can propose strategies for responding to discrimination, stereotyping, and bullying. (PHE)

## ENGAGE

(Learning that activates or hooks student engagement and targets instruction about context.)

## ELL Consideration:

Scan the *Section Summary* for content that requires context. Look-up images that can provide visual cues that will benefit all learners. Project these images as you read.

Possible suggestions for visual context building:

Place: Kansas vs. Arizona

Concept: Western Theme Park

## Talking Circle Prompts:

- What makes you unique?
- What are your gifts? (*gift here used not as a present or materialistic item but as a quality, trait or personal strength*)



## REPRESENTATION

(Learning that checks-in on student understanding(s) and builds comprehension and knowledge.)

Before students can apply what they have learned, take time to check if they've learned it. This guide has compiled Vocabulary and Comprehension Strategies to support building and checking student understandings. These strategies were selected to be universal (used across subject areas) and to be chunked and/or broken down into pieces.

These strategies are meant to build student skills and encourage overall literacy.

Below is a selection of suggested Vocabulary – at the end of this guide are additional vocabulary supports organized by section.

pg. 21 self conscious	pg. 22 dexterous
pg. 40 depressing	pg. 41 coward
pg. 41 secluded	pg. 42 contagious
pg. 44 ostracized	pg. 45 Saguaro

## ACTION & EXPRESSION

(Learning that supports student application of understanding and knowledge.)

### Saguaro Cactus Close Reading

In pairs or small groups, invite students to do a close reading of this text excerpt. This page is significant because the title of the text is revealed. An option for engagement is an attached three questions comprehension strategy support. (Printable quote and strategy page attached)

Or read aloud the excerpt and have students individually or in small groups reflect on the following prompts:

What are the *teachings* in this quote?

What does it mean by 'insignificant'?

### All Around Us

Inspired by Aven's reflection about her life in relation to the life of a saguaro cactus, have students apply this concept to their immediate outdoor environment.

Have students brainstorm the plants and/or animals found locally – these elements are part of our community. By prompting students to widen their view of 'community members', beyond human community members, we are embedding Indigenous worldviews and perspectives into our classroom learning.

Specifically –**First Peoples Principles of Learning: Learning is ...focused on a sense of place.**

Students in this activity can be encouraged to apply a varied, seasonal and/or generational perspective.

**Varied perspective-** vantage point, how/what might this community member witness/see from their viewpoint?

**Seasonal perspective-** how/what might this community member's perspective change, heighten based on seasons?

**Generational perspective-** how/what might this community have witnessed over time?

## ACTION & EXPRESSION CONTINUED...

(Learning that supports student application of understanding and knowledge.)

Examples of local elements that could be used instead of a saguaro cactus for this activity:

- *Cedar Tree* (Time, seasonal changes, spanning height)
- *Canadian Goose* (aerial view, seasonal viewpoint coming and going)
- *Eagle* (aerial view, present for all season, climate changes)
- *Salmon* (view from below, seasonal etc.)
- *Local water way* (like a creek/river, or pond)

See attached organizer for students to think about local environment elements creatively and or reflectively as witnesses to the world around them.

### One-Pager: Ongoing Cumulative Activity

The One-Pager is a cumulative activity that results in a final assignment for the novel on page 88 of this guide.

One of the key parts of the one-pager is to respond to quotes chosen from the novel. It is advisable that if you intend to use the one-pager as a cumulative activity, that you collect quotes as a class throughout your reading of the novel. Then, at the conclusion of the novel, students will have a bank of quotes to choose from.

Gathering quotes: pause at the end of Section 1 and identify key moment(s) in the novel and pull quote(s) to store as a reminder. This could be an ongoing shareable word document, stored on chart paper as you read as a class, or another visible and editable structure to support visible ongoing quote analysis. When recording the quote - make note of the page number and if relevant – who is speaking.

### Grade 8 Extension Text:

#### Supplementary Text Comparison: Alvin & Me

Read the Short Story: 'Alvin and Me' (Printable Copy attached):

Have students do a compare and contrast between Section 1 of the novel and the short story Alvin & Me, with specific focus on the theme of belonging.

This could be done individually, in pairs or in small groups. Students should be encouraged to go beyond content in their comparison to include perspective, form, etc.



# Saguaro Cactus Close Reading

Dad says the saguaro is likely over two hundred years old (he had to Google saguaros to find that out). I like to sit on the hard desert dirt and think of all the things that have happened in this saguaro's life—it stood here when Stagecoach Pass was built sixty years ago and when Arizona became a state over a hundred years ago. It stood here as the Civil War raged on the other side of the country, when women were finally granted the right to vote, and when Martin Luther King Jr. gave his “I have a dream” speech. Billions of people have been born and have died in its lifetime. And, of course, it stood here on the day I was born and will likely be standing on the day I die.

I am an entirely insignificant event in the life of this cactus. I try to remember that as the sky darkens and the lights of Scottsdale and Phoenix brighten the earth—millions of lights for millions of people. And then there's just me, sitting in the dirt on a mighty hill being circled by a poor old donkey and a tired camel.



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

# Saguaro Cactus Close Reading

<b>Right There Questions</b>	How old is a saguaro cactus? Respond in full sentence form.
<b>Think &amp; Search Questions</b>	What are two events that the saguaro has witnessed? Respond in full sentence form.
<b>Author &amp; Me Questions</b>	What does the author mean by, "I am entirely insignificant event in the life of this cactus"? Respond in full sentence form.
<b>Extension:</b> Write your own question below – and record what type of question you are creating.	



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

# All Around Us

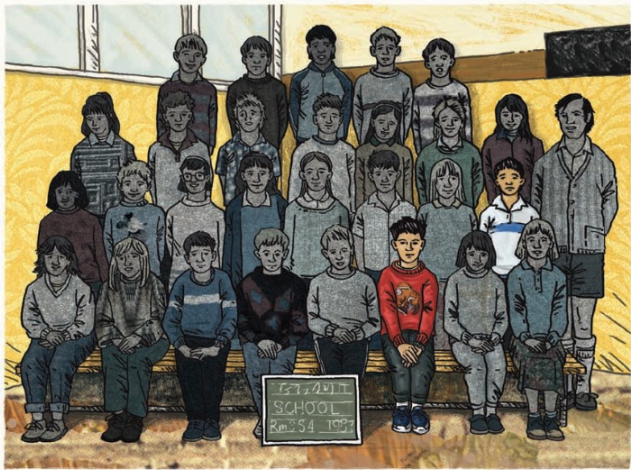
**Class Brainstorm:** What natural elements (animals, plants, trees, rivers, etc) exist in our community?

Choose one of the natural elements from your brainstorm and use your imagination.

**Personal Brainstorm:** How does \_\_\_\_\_ see the world?

**Personal Brainstorm:** What does this \_\_\_\_\_ see/notice about your community? What historical events, changes, or events has it witnessed? (TIP: It might be a good idea to think about how old your element is!)

Create an image, comic or short paragraph that communicates a story about your community from your chosen unique perspective. *Include your best ideas from your personal brainstorm.*



# ALVIN AND ME

BY CHRIS TSE

A week before Alvin arrived, I got summoned to the principal's office. I was a good kid. I never got into trouble. I was sure I'd done nothing wrong. But still, I couldn't help worrying ...

Mr Tyson explained that there was a new boy starting. He needed a friend – someone to show him round, to help settle him in.

"You speak Cantonese, don't you, Chris?" Mr Tyson asked.

I did, but only at home. Never at school. Speaking another language only drew attention. I didn't want that.

... ..

I wasn't much help to Alvin. He barely spoke a word that first week, although he seemed to be coping OK. Occasionally, Mrs Harrison came over to check. She commended me for being a good buddy. Obviously the fact Alvin wasn't in tears or hadn't run away was seen as success.

Alvin did ask some questions. He especially wanted to know about my family. He struggled to understand when I spoke in English, which meant I reluctantly had to switch to Cantonese.

"What do you two talk about?" Tom asked one lunchtime.

"Nothing," I said, shrugging off his question. "Schoolwork."

... ..

Alvin sat on our bench by the jungle gym every lunchtime. He was so quiet we sometimes forgot he was there, but he always listened and watched intently. He was like a person studying for an exam. Sometimes Alvin laughed when we laughed. One day, he finally said something. We were talking about our favourite cartoon, the *Transformers*. In the middle of a debate about the coolest robot, Alvin spoke.

"What's 'cool'?" he asked.

"Cool means cool," said Johnny helpfully.

"It means something is really, *really* good. It's cool," offered Tom.

Alvin thought about this, but he remained uncertain.

"Cool," he kept repeating. "The transformer robot is cold?"



New students weren't uncommon at my school, but they came from other parts of New Zealand – never Hong Kong. My entire class was buzzing, but on the morning Alvin was introduced, he didn't say a word. He played with his shirt cuff and stared at his shoes, avoiding eye contact. He looked like he might burst into tears at any second.

Mrs Harrison showed Alvin to the empty desk next to me. She explained to the class that I was going to be his buddy but we were all to make him welcome. Alvin looked relieved to see a Chinese face. I told him my name and said that I could speak Cantonese – if I had to.

"Thank you," Alvin said. He spoke so quietly that, at first, I wasn't sure he'd said anything at all.

... ..

My parents owned a Chinese takeaway and grocery shop. When we had shared lunches at school, my mum would deliver crispy prawn crackers and golden wontons, sticky with sweet-and-sour sauce. They were devoured. When I was old enough, I worked at the shop after school and on weekends, doing my homework in between serving customers and bagging rice.

As I grew older, I was given more responsibilities: the banking, opening and closing the shop, taking orders. I had a very different childhood from all the other kids I knew. I wished I could hang out more, like my friends, but working in the shop was a way to help my parents. Like I said, I was a good kid.

... ..



I tried to explain in Cantonese, but I found myself becoming as confused as Alvin. I could tell that it amused the others to hear me speaking another language, and embarrassment washed over me. I told Alvin that if he didn't understand by now, he never would. He lowered his face and returned to his quiet self. I felt awful. I was meant to be his buddy. I worried that one of the boys would tell Mrs Harrison I'd been unkind to Alvin – or, worse, they'd tell Mr Tyson.

Later that day, after the final bell had gone, Alvin asked me if it felt strange to be different. The question surprised me. I told him that I wasn't different. I'd known most of these kids since my first day of school. Sometimes I got teased, but I tried not to let it bother me. The fact that I looked Chinese made me an easy target, but it was no different from teasing Tom about his curls or Johnny for being short.

Alvin studied my face. His sad brown eyes said that something was bothering him.

"I look different, like you, but I *feel* different, too."

I didn't know what to say.

... ..

I thought about our conversation for days. I especially thought about it when my parents spoke to me in Cantonese. How *were* Alvin and I different: from everyone else ... but also from each other? Looking at the two of us, how would a person know which boy was from New Zealand and which boy was from Hong Kong? We were both Chinese on the outside – but I'd been born in Lower Hutt, the same as my mum. Her father had moved to New Zealand as a young boy from Canton. I grew up spending a lot of time with my mum's parents – they looked after me while my parents worked. My dad's family also came from China. When my brother was born, my other grandmother moved to New Zealand to help out, too. So yes, I looked Chinese – like Alvin – but I hardly ever *felt* Chinese. Actually, I didn't know how I felt. Different from other kids, sometimes ... but mostly the same.

... ..



Alvin's first days became weeks, then months. Soon enough, it felt as though he'd always been at our school. His English improved. He began to open up and talk about his old life. He would point to the sky, saying that some of the buildings in Hong Kong were so tall you couldn't see the top. None of us had seen a city like that. We loved hearing those stories.

Alvin eventually drifted into his own circle of friends. After that, the only time I really spoke to him was on a Saturday. His parents sometimes came to our shop to buy sheets of dried bean curd and shrimp paste. Alvin would come, too, and we'd sit behind the counter, talking. To be precise, Alvin did most of the talking. He seemed so relaxed now – nothing like the timid boy I'd first met. He even teased me about my Cantonese. According to Alvin, it wasn't that good, but he'd never liked to say.

... ..

It's been years since I've seen Alvin. Sometimes, when I hear the word "cool", I think about him. Looking back, I see that even though I was meant to help Alvin, he actually helped me. He made me realise that I wasn't the same as everyone else. More than that, I finally understood that there's no such thing as "the same". We all have different stories.

It's because of Alvin that I began to learn about my family history. I found out why my grandfather started a new life in New Zealand. I also researched where my ancestors came from – where I came from. Alvin helped me to become the person I hadn't known how to be. Now, I'm no longer afraid to speak Cantonese in public. I can probably thank Alvin for that too. He was right. I need the practice!



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## Alvin and Me

by Chris Tse

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Published 2017 by the Ministry of Education  
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.  
[www.education.govt.nz](http://www.education.govt.nz)

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ISBN 978 0 478 16940 9 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū  
Editor: Susan Paris  
Designer: Jodi Wicksteed  
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop  
Consulting Editors: Ross Calman and Emeli Sione



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## SCHOOL JOURNAL

MAY 2017



### SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 3 MAY 2017

#### Curriculum learning areas

English  
Health and Physical Education

#### Reading year level

Year 5

#### Keywords

Cantonese, change, Chinese New Zealanders, culture, difference, embarrassment, ethnic diversity, friendship, heritage, identity, individuality, race, relationships, respect, responsibility

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

# Comparison:

## Insignificant Events in the Life of a Cactus & Alvin and Me

Use the below chart to compare the experiences of Chris (the narrator of Alvin and Me) and Aven (the narrator of Insignificant Events...). How do these stories and experiences differ and how are they similar? Use the chart below.

### Differences:

Insignificant Events...

Alvin & Me:



### Similarities: