

# THE HONEST TRUTH BY DAN GEMEINHART

## SYNOPSIS

Twelve-year-old Mark has been in and out of hospital his whole life – and he’s fed up. So when his cancer returns, he decides he’s had enough. Running away with his super-loyal dog Beau, he sets out to climb the mountain that he promised his late grandfather he would conquer.

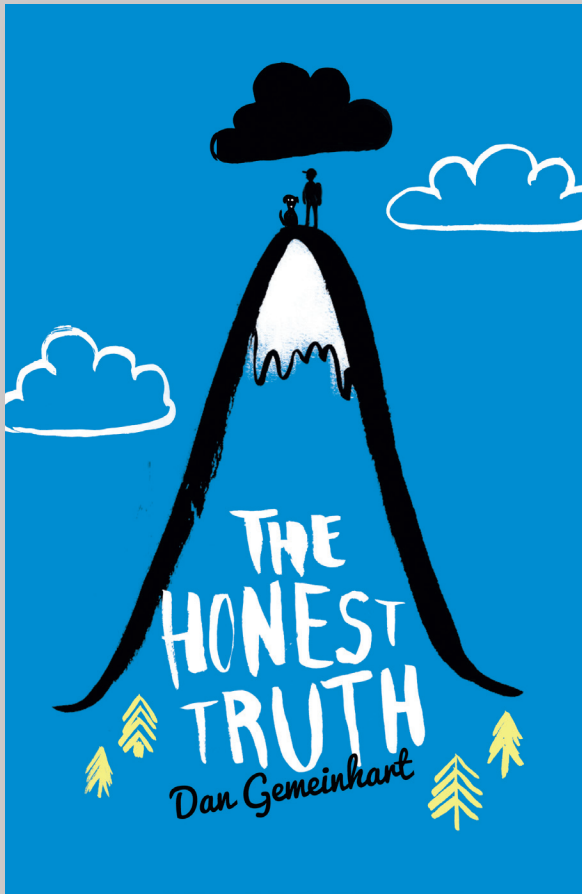
He doesn’t want to die, but if he has to, he wants it to be on his own terms and away from his tearful mother, his brave father and his ever-faithful best friend Jess.

Mark makes a good head start, throwing everyone off the scent with some careful planning. But he soon finds himself lonely and unwell in a dangerous, unfamiliar city, and is savagely beaten up by a gang of boys who take his money and leave him. Mark comes round and is more determined than ever to get to the top of Mount Rainier.


Throughout his pilgrimage, Mark takes photographs on his grandpa’s old film camera. The pictures are a record of fleeting moments – of lows and highs, of small triumphs and of moments of despair and defeat. Along the way, his life collides with the lives of others, but through it all it is Beau who sticks by him – with dogged determination and fearsome loyalty.


By sheer force of will, the pair find themselves at the foot of the mountain, and so begins their epic climb. Every step brings Mark closer to the death he thought he longed for – and further away from everything he loves and lives for. As the heavy grey storm clouds part momentarily, Mark finds himself confronted by the awesome beauty of Mount Rainier’s tallest peak, and he knows he has one final choice left to make – whether to live or die.

But has he left it too late to choose?



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## WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS ...

*'It's silly when a book makes you cry, isn't it? When it's all about courage, connecting with other lives, and finding your own answers to the most impossible questions about living and loving. OK - maybe not so silly, maybe that's what books are for.*

*Thanks, Dan, this is a truly great story. And there's a dog that helps out too!*

**BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE**

## AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Dan Gemeinhart lives in a small town smack bang in the middle of Washington State with his wife and three young daughters. He's lucky and grateful to be a teacher-librarian in an elementary school, where he gets to share awesome books with awesome kids. He loves camping, cooking and travelling. He also plays guitar (badly) and reads (constantly). His house is always a mess. He is really pretty darn happy.

## AND IN HIS OWN WORDS ...

*'I was born in Frankfurt, Germany - but just because my dad was in the army. My family moved A LOT when I was growing up, so I went to a different school almost every year until I was in middle school. This was tough, but it also gave me a lot of interesting experiences and probably ended up making me a stronger, more confident person. I finished high school in Kennewick, Washington, where I met this girl named Karen. I had a pretty big crush on her. Luckily for me, the crush was eventually mutual. Then I went off to college at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington, where I studied history and how to be a teacher. When I graduated, I married that girl named Karen (and we're still married today). We taught for a while in Cairo, Egypt, where we rode camels and climbed the pyramids (before being chased off by scary guys with machine guns). After Egypt, we moved to Wenatchee, Washington, where I got a dream job as a librarian. My wife is a high-school English teacher in nearby Cashmere, where we live. My three daughters are a constant source of laughter and sleepiness.'*



# AUTHOR MOTIVATION

'The Honest Truth is a very important book to me. I wrote for ten years before finally getting my first book published but it was totally worth all the work and all the waiting. I don't believe in giving up, and don't think that you should, either.'

DAN GEMEINHART

## THEMES

- Loyalty
- Friendship
- Living with cancer
- Facing up to death
- Determination
- Loneliness
- Moral dilemmas

## WRITING STYLE

*The Honest Truth* is a rare and extraordinary novel about big questions, small moments and one incredible journey. The writing is clean and spare, but richly descriptive – full of life, energy and vigour. Loneliness, friendship and loyalty are concepts that weave their way through the book, as Mark navigates the complex moral maze of facing up to and taking control of his own death. The writing is enhanced by the smart use of metaphor and simile, with feelings and emotions often assuming the shapes and behaviour of animals. The writing is richly poetic at times, and the novel introduces the concept of haiku. There are 26 chapters over 240 pages, and the novel would suit readers aged 10+. Some of the themes (death and cancer) could be upsetting for some children.



# PUPIL ACTIVITIES

## *1. A moment in time*

Throughout his journey, Mark uses his grandpa's old film camera to capture fleeting moments. On pages 226–227 of the novel you can find a reminder of all the pictures Mark took along the way.

Think about the story those pictures tell; if a stranger had found the roll of film and printed out the pictures, what do you think they would have made of them? Without any other clues to go by, what story do you think those pictures might tell?

By using Mark's images as a prompt, write a short story based upon what you see and what the images bring to your imagination. You could write this story down, or you could try telling the story out loud, coming up with the ideas as you go.

Alternatively, working in small groups, find and print out a selection of pictures, making sure there are the same number of pictures as there are people in your group. Each person in the group should choose one of the photographs. Then, sitting around an imaginary 'campfire', you should take it in turns to improvise a story as a group, using your chosen photograph to inspire you when it comes to your turn.

Finally, imagine your day so far. What 'moments in time' would you have chosen to capture in order to sum up your day? If you have a camera, why not try using it for one day to snap these moments in time? At the end of the day, look back over the photos. What do you think they say about your day? How do they make you feel?

## *2. That's the truth*

All the way through the book, Mark makes statements which he follows up with the words, 'That's the truth.' Why do you think Mark does this? Go through the book and write a list of all the things Mark says are 'the truth'.

**(Teachers, there's a handy list for you at the back of these notes.)** Are they mostly positive or negative?

Which statements do you agree with, and which do you not agree with? Do you think Mark's view of the truth



changes towards the end of the book?

Think of some things which you personally think are 'the truth'. If you had to pick just one statement to be followed by the words 'That's the truth,' what would it be?

Mark also frequently says, 'Here's what I don't get:' followed by something he thinks is crazy or ridiculous, or which he simply doesn't understand. Go through the book and see if you can find any examples of this. (**Teachers, a handy list of page references can be found at the back of these notes.**)

Working together in groups, come up with your own list of things that you 'don't get'. Remember to start each one with, 'Here's what I don't get:'.

### **3. Chapter 1<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>**

This book is a 'dual narrative', which means it is told from two different people's points of view. The chapters in this book switch between Mark's point of view and Jess's. Mark's chapters are numbered in whole numbers (1, 2, 3, 4 etc.) and he tells his story in the first person (using the word 'I' and talking directly about himself, saying things like 'I went ...', 'I felt ...'). Jess's chapters are the 'halves' in between Mark's chapters (numbered 1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>, 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>, 3<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> and so on). Her story is told in the 'third person' - in other words, a narrator is talking about her, saying things like 'Jess thought' and 'Jessie swallowed'.

Imagine fitting a third point of view into the story. Who else could tell Mark's story? His mum? His dad? Beau? How about the mountain, or even the camera? Choose one of these and, writing from your chosen character's (or object's) point of view, write a 'Chapter 1<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>'.

### **4. Haiku**

*Alone, leaving home.  
A new journey, a new road.  
Off to mountains now.*



Mark loves to write haiku, a form of Japanese poem. A haiku poem is special because it always has three lines, and these three lines always have the same pattern of syllables (or beats): five beats in the first line, seven in the second line, and five in the third line. There are lots and lots of haiku throughout the book; in fact, every one of Jess's chapters begins and ends with a haiku. Above is the first haiku Mark writes in the notebook he is carrying with him on his journey (page 8). On page 80, he tells Shelby (the little girl on the bus) that he and Jess like to use haiku as a kind of code.

Take it in turns to read some of the haiku out loud. (**Teachers, there is a handy list of page references at the back of these notes.**) When it's not your turn to read, close your eyes and listen carefully, and try to keep a count of the beats. You could also try reading haiku aloud whilst walking around the room, taking one step on every beat or syllable. Then try your hand at writing your own.

**Teachers can help students along by writing a list of subjects or prompts on the board for them to base their haiku on (such as autumn, favourite food, feeling sad).**

**Once everyone is confident at writing haiku and counting the beats, why not try playing a game of 'Call My Haiku Bluff'? Ask each student to write down the numbers 1 to 10. Have six or seven genuine haiku prepared (your own or from the book). The remainder should not be haiku at all – they should each have an incorrect number of beats somewhere within the three lines. Mix up the correct and incorrect haiku, and read them out to the class, numbering them from 1 to 10 (remembering where the incorrect ones were!). Students should mark each one with a tick if they think it's a haiku and a cross if they think it isn't. You could award a prize for students who can correctly identify all of the haiku.**

### **5. 'Wrestling with an idea'**

On page 33, Jessie's idea seems to take on a life of its own. First the idea 'whispers' in her head, then it 'tugs' on her sleeve, and 'elbows' at her thoughts. It is as if her idea has turned into a person.

In a similar way, Mark's headache becomes a 'growling grizzly with sharp claws' (page 63). His headache then continues to 'behave' like a bear: 'The headache was sharpening its teeth on the inside of my skull' (page 75).



Think of some other situations where thoughts or feelings are described in animal-like ways: for example, having butterflies in your tummy, or your thoughts buzzing around in your head like a swarm of bees.

Teachers, write a list of feelings on the board ('happy', 'excited', 'nervous', 'relaxed', 'worried', 'angry'). Taking one feeling at a time, ask the class to imagine that that feeling is a person. Ask them how they think that feeling might look, how it might move around, or what it might try to do to get your attention (as Jess's idea 'tugged on her sleeve'). Give each person in the class a feeling to act out. Ask them to imagine they are that feeling, and to move around the room the way they think their feeling would move. You could split the class in half, with one half moving and the other half observing. The observers should try and guess what each student's animal is, and what the emotion might be. If the students are feeling confident enough, you could always try this with one student at a time taking to the floor with the rest of the class trying to guess.

You could do a similar exercise asking the students to each write down a feeling. They should then choose an animal they think matches that feeling, and write it down as well (for example 'grumpy' could be a polar bear, or 'nervous' could be a squirrel). Ask the students to write down what it is about the animal (the way it moves, the way it looks, the noise it makes?) that makes them think of the feeling.

## WRITING PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *'I started up the mountain.*

*Beau was by my side.*

*Of course he was. He always was. When I'd hung up the phone and come outside, he was sitting right where I'd left him, by my backpack in the trees, waiting for me. My other best friend.'* (page 175)

How strong is the bond between Mark and his dog, Beau? Do you think it is possible for an animal to truly be a friend? Can an animal ever really be a person's best friend? Why do you think Mark chose to take Beau with him? Do you think he was right to take Beau along, knowing the risks he was taking? How does Beau show Mark that he loves him?



2. *'I couldn't shake the memory of my mom crying. I knew she was probably crying right at that moment. My dad too, maybe. I'd seen way too much of them crying. That's the truth.'* (page 22)

Do you think adults should cry in front of children?

3. *'Shelby scrunched up her eyebrows. "Your best friend is a girl? Like a girlfriend?"  
"No. Just a friend who's a girl. We've been best friends for ever."  
"Oh."'* (page 80)

Do you think boys and girls can really be best friends?

4. *'The mountain was calling me. I had to run away. I had to.'* (page 3)

When the novel begins, Mark has made the biggest decision of his life: to die. What's more, he wants to do it alone – away from his family and his best friend. What do you think of Mark's choice to run away and die on his own? Why do you think Mark says that he 'had to run away'? Do you think he had a choice? Do you think children should ever be given the right to choose to die?

5. Both Jess and Wesley (the truck driver) have to decide whether or not to keep Mark's secret. Do you agree with the decisions they made? Do you think you would have chosen to keep Mark's secret, or do you think you would have told?

6. Read pages 211–218. Why do you think Mark decides he wants to live after the clouds have cleared and he has seen the mountain? Why do you think it was so important to Mark to see the mountain in the first place?





# PAGE REFERENCES

Teachers: the following lists are not exhaustive, but give a large number of examples for you to work from.

'That's the truth' page references: 20; 22; 26; 27; 40; 59; 64; 81; 94; 97; 110; 129; 147; 151; 161; 171; 177; 198; 199; 215; 218; 229

'Here's what I don't get' page references: 27; 46; 64; 97; 114; 147; 179; 199

'Haiku' page references: 8; 22; 33; 35; 51; 52; 69; 78-79; 87; 103; 106; 117; 120; 130; 135; 136; 155; 156; 169; 171; 187; 189; 203; 204

