

## Resources for *If I Ever Get Out Of Here* by Eric Gansworth

### IN-CLASS INTRODUCTION

This lesson is designed to provide students with a one-class introduction to the book. The lesson can be used to start off a class reading of the text, or to encourage them to read it independently.

**As a recipient of One Book resources, the Free Library requires that you devote one class period to introducing *If I Ever Get Out Of Here* to students, either using this lesson or your own plan.**

#### Introduction

1. Let students know they are going to be meeting a character named Lewis. Have them track what details come out about him in the first chapter.
2. Read the first chapter out loud, up to page 7 (Maybe I needed a new nickname myself, something like “the invisible boy.”)
3. Discuss – what do we know about Lewis so far? Do any of his experiences match experiences you have had bridging the difference between home and school?
4. (Optional) Show the intro video about author, Eric Gansworth:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vjUb4jbP4s>

What overlap do you see between Gansworth’s life and identity and the book?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Chapter 1

What have Lewis' strategies been for fitting in at his school, and how have they backfired?

### Chapter 2

What is the social order like at Lewis' school? What advice does his family and friends give about how to cope?

### Chapter 3

What advice does George give to Lewis, and how does it differ from what else he has heard? How does Lewis react?

### Chapter 4

What is the difference between Lewis and Carson's attitudes towards school? How does Carson treat Lewis, and how does Lewis feel about that?

### Chapter 5

What are the different ways Lewis can be perceived, now that his hair is cut short? Why does he feel the "guilt-slug in his belly" (49) about this when it happens?

### Chapter 6

What relationship to George and Lewis each have to their homes? What are the similarities and differences? How do each of their families feel?

### Chapter 7

Why does Lewis give up on Carson and the New Yah festivities on the reservation? What does he risk by doing this?

### Chapter 8

At the end of his time with George, Lewis share some personal information with Mr. Haddonfield. Did he do this to put distance between him and that family, or to be honest, or both?

### Chapter 9

Why is Lewis lonely, and what does he do to try and alleviate that loneliness?

### Chapter 10

What offer does George make to Lewis? Why doesn't he make this offer to Stacey, and what does she counter offer? What is Lewis' take on this situation by the end of the chapter?

### Chapter 11

At the Wings concert, Lewis asks: "I didn't have any objection to being known as an Indian, but couldn't I have a life as just me?" Why does Paul McCartney make Lewis ask this question?

### Chapter 12

What challenge does Lewis face about the reservation and his romantic life? What would happen if he partnered

with a non-Indian woman?

#### Chapter 13

What choices does Lewis have to make about his dating life? For him, what's the difference between dating a white girl from school and an Indian girl from the reservation?

#### Chapter 14

What is Carson's attitude about Evan? Why do you think he bullies Lewis, and what do Carson and Lewis each think he should do about it?

#### Chapter 15

Why does Evan target Lewis in school? What is Lewis' potential solution? What about George, and Stacey, and his own mother? Whose approach do you think is the best one?

#### Chapter 16

After Lewis gets a ride home from Mrs. Tunny, he says "I could believe all I wanted that offering a reasonable explanation to someone in power would set the world right, that rules were in place so everyone was treated equally. But the truth was, no one was ever treated all that equally." Do you agree with his assessment of his situation?

#### Chapter 17

Why does Lewis opt out of going to school? What resolution does he make by the end of the chapter? Do you agree with his plan?

#### Chapter 18

What eventually gets Lewis to return to school, and what role do each of the adults play in his return? Do you think they are acting in his best interest?

#### Chapter 19

Why do you think Evan punched George? What is going on behind the scenes that Lewis hasn't figured out yet, and how has it affected George's social status?

#### Chapter 20

What is the social scene like when Lewis returns to school after the holiday break?

#### Chapter 21

What happens at the pay phones in the social hall? How do Lewis, George, and Mr. Haddonfield react?

#### Chapter 22

What does Lewis say that makes his mother cry? Why do you think he said it, and why does he regret it immediately after?

#### Chapter 23

Why doesn't Lewis' family invite the Haddonfields in? How do they react when they come so close to entering their home?

#### Chapter 24

Why does George and his father choose to go out with the Indian plow team?

#### Chapter 25

How do George and Mr. Haddonfield react to Lewis' house? Do they have the impression that Lewis expected?

Why do you think George kept his secret until after he's back at his own home?

#### Chapter 26

What gifts does each person give when George leaves town? Why do you think they each chose to give this item?

What does it say about their relationship to the recipient?

## SUGGESTED ANALYTICAL & CREATIVE ASSESSMENTS

1. Write an **additional chapter** from the viewpoint of another character – George, Albert, Summer, Stacy, or somebody else. What do they have to say about Lewis after George has left town?
2. Imagine George DID write a letter to Lewis at the end of the novel. What would it have said?
3. Write **book review** discussing what you think the strengths and weaknesses of the book were. Optional: read the Interview with Eric Gansworth (included in this resource guide) and quote the author in your review.
4. Read the **poem** “A Half-Life of Cardio-Pulmonary Function” (included in this resource guide) and compare and/or contrast the themes with those of the novel. Where do you see common ideas in Gansworth’s work?
5. Research the **Tuscarora Nation** online, and present the history of the tribe to the class.

## ONLINE RESOURCES

### LESSON PLANS & RESOURCES

#### **Eric Gansworth's Website**

A compendium of information about the author, including artwork he created for the book and other projects.

<https://www.ericgansworth.com/>

#### **Rich in Color Group Discussion**

A discussion by a diversity-minded YA Literature Blog. Mild spoilers.

<http://richincolor.com/2013/12/group-discussion-of-if-i-ever-get-out-of-here/>

#### **Eric Gansworth's Poetry**

A brief biography and three poems, from the Poetry Foundation.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/eric-gansworth>

#### **LibGuide for "If I Ever Get Out Of here"**

Includes links to videos, outside resources about Native American life, and a character list.

<https://libguides.countryschool.net/c.php?g=385212>

#### **Talking with Eric Gansworth Part I**

A transcribed interview, largely about the influence of The Beatles on his work.

<http://ccblogc.blogspot.com/2014/03/talking-with-eric-gansworth-part-1.html>

### MULTIMEDIA

#### **Video Intro to the Author**

A recording advertising his college alma mater, with discussion of his interest as a writer and footage of his artwork. A great way to get students thinking about higher education.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vjUb4jbP4s>

#### **Discography for "If I Ever Get Out Of Here"**

A complete list of YouTube links for the songs referenced in each chapter title of the book, as compiled by Eric Gansworth himself.

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1yKyxLWbCZ\\_-eAC-kRKUL3CO1\\_8pBv4LOq0\\_vbpvYLBQ/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1yKyxLWbCZ_-eAC-kRKUL3CO1_8pBv4LOq0_vbpvYLBQ/edit)

## Interview with the Author: Eric Gansworth

<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-authors/article/76583-q-a-with-jewell-parker-rhodes.htm>

**Diversity in YA: You've written several critically acclaimed novels for adults before, but this is your first novel for young adults. What inspired you to write this book?**

**Eric Gansworth:** First, let me say thank you for taking the time to read this book and consider its themes and concerns. As often happens, several circumstances converging brought this book about. My fiction for adults involves younger life extensively, but always with distance, reflection. Young people's literature advocate Debbie Reese and I gave conference keynotes together a few years ago, and as a result, we came to know of each other's work more explicitly. Later, she introduced me to Cheryl Klein, Executive Editor at Arthur A. Levine. In our discussions of what made a great young adult novel, Cheryl noted a major difference between adult novels about youth and young adult novels is a sense of immediacy in the young adult novel's scope. It was one of those moments of freedom for me, to understand I could write about young life without needing to set it up as a remembrance. I have no idea why I had to hear that specifically to understand its truth, but it was like magic for me.

Of my major conflicts at that age, the most dominant was the sense of culture shock. Our reservation school went through fifth grade, so other than our teachers, and a couple people who'd married into my family, I didn't know anyone who wasn't Indian until I was 11. I suspect that was true of my other 23 reservation classmates. Suddenly, that September, we were thrown into a school with 375 peers, most of whom were white and many of whom had some ill feelings toward the reservation's inhabitants. A fiction writer needs to complicate characters' lives, and that shift to junior high had been pretty complicating for me. It seemed like the perfect fictional situation, but I didn't know exactly which aspect of that period to choose.

As often happens with me, a total fluke lighted the focusing fuse. Literary journal editors traditionally send contributors a copy of the issue their work is in. The contributor list in one journal I received contained the name of someone I'd gone to junior high with, a guy from a military family. Seeing that name, I had this sudden rush of memory. The important few non-Indian friends I'd had in junior high were military kids. The journal contributor turned out not to be my old friend, but thanks to Google

Images, I did find him, immediately recognizing the boy I'd known in the man he'd become. He lived only a couple hours away. I eventually reached out and communicated with him, and he was very helpful in clarifying some details of his life as a military kid, but I was well on the way of developing the landscape I was going to dive into before I sent him an email. I didn't want to be too locked into autobiographical details.

**DiYA: Why did you decide to set the book in the 1970s?**

**EG:** As a practical measure, I set much of my fiction in some frame parallel to my life. A lot of *Extra Indians* (my last novel for adults) occurs during the Vietnam War. Though the main characters are necessarily quite a bit older than I am, there is still a young character grounding it for me. I'm not sure why I tend to need that as a writer, but if it works...

In this case, I understood that a different era for a young adult novel might be an audience liability. I figured I'd write it true to my own era and attempt to update the setting when I was done. One central event was always going to be The Blizzard of '77, a storm so notorious it seems to have saddled Buffalo with a permanent bad weather reputation. But I was willing to consider sacrificing that setting, if need be. Terrible storms still wreak havoc, despite all of our advances in the 35 years since this story's era.

More than this singular weather event, though, I discovered that the kind of story I was telling demanded to exist in that time. Current technology and even current educational philosophy would have caused major headaches for the events I wanted Lewis to face. Things we take for granted, cell phones and the internet, just as ready examples, would have dramatically changed the novel's landscape. The big decision to stick to the '70s came when I saw how large a role music was going to play in the novel. As it evolved, I understood I had to keep its setting despite the risks.

The 1970s was the great decade of the rock album as an artistic form. Artists had pioneered it with landmark albums in the 1960s, paving the way for bolder, more cohesive forms. The albums I grew up with were complete packages — with large format thematically sophisticated cover art, posters, stickers, lyric sheets, liner notes, all together presenting a synthesis of art, words and music. The physical form dictated tonal arcs. Because you had to flip the album to hear all of it, Side One and Side

Two were carefully sequenced to complement each other. Even radio changed with the form's dominance. FM stations began running "album oriented format," in which DJs would play whole sides, dedicating resources because audiences wanted that full experience.

I'm not a music fogy — I love creating Playlists, and in the '90s, I was a total Mix Tape Guy, sadly, like Ponytail Derek in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Just the same, even now, I still listen to full albums fairly often. I like to experience the complete artistic statement, and that inclination seems true of many people my age. I didn't want this novel to lose the culture of "album love," or "album worship." The shared passion and discovery builds the friendship bridge for Lewis and George. It seems odd that this one thing was the deal breaker, but overhauling that fragile phase of their friendship would have been too major a risk if I'd set the novel now, in the era of individual song downloads and the option to "shuffle."

**DiYA:** You've created artwork that riffs on famous album covers to accompany each part of the novel. For Part One, you've created art for a fictional album called *If I Ever Get Out of Here* that's based on Paul McCartney's album *Band on the Run*. What were you aiming to convey with this fictional album cover?

**EG:** Having had parallel careers as a professional writer and visual artist, I've been fortunate to have editors who've understood that these are complementary sides of my work. I love graphic design and illustration but that's never really what I'm up to. I may love it so deeply in part because I am not skilled enough to do it. But my paintings often draw on the tropes of graphic design. For book images, I want parallel narratives for those readers who also have a visual sensibility. Because of that approach, the paintings in each book are in some way thematically bound to the narrative. That first painting for any book to a degree dictates the directions of the others. I tend not to examine the ideas' origins until they're a little stabilized, allowing my subconscious to work a bit before I intervene. For this book, I wanted to explore the ways music becomes a part of us. To present that, I recast all the human figures from the *Wings* album, assigning each member of the "band" a major character in the book. They were fudged a little, but not much. They were still escaping, as *Wings and Co.* had been, on the cover of *Band on the Run*. This desire for escape fit the theme of Part One. In this case, once in the spot light,

they've recognized the formidable brick wall they were up against, so that worked for my narrative purposes.

The subconscious part of the process was revealed later to me by one of my first readers. One of the novel's other "period correct" kid-culture icons is the series of "Wacky Packages" bubblegum stickers. They were super popular when I was in junior high, and I loved them, not so much for their grotesque humor (which, admittedly, I did love), but because they were my first real exposure to satire. They navigated social critique so keenly that immediately, you understood how regularly you were being played by consumer product advertising. I loved that you were laughing, and being informed at the same time.

When the paintings were done, one of my first readers looked and said, "so, the Part Division Paintings this time are like Wacky Packages of these albums?" I had not consciously planned that, but it was clear that I'd made exactly that decision on some unaware level early in designing the images that would represent the divisions. Mostly, they're not satirical (though the last one probably is), but they are riffs, iconic images thematically recast and repurposed, maintaining enough integrity that viewers can recognize the origin and are invited to consider the transformation.

**DiYA: If you could give one major pointer to writers who are interested in writing about American Indians, but who are not Native themselves, what would it be?**

**EG:** Wow, that's a tough one. I freely admit I'm maybe not the best person to answer that question. The simplistic pointer would be "please don't," but that would surely be hypocritical of me, as I've developed my share of white characters and female characters, and clearly, I have neither of those identities. In truth, though, I'm often puzzled by the compulsion of non-Indian writers to want to write about Indians. I write white characters because, let's face it — no matter how Indian you are in America today, you can not avoid white people, even if you wanted to. And a contemporary realist novel in which women don't appear would not acknowledge our world.

But if you're not from an indigenous community, it would take a concerted effort for you even to find real Indian enclaves. It's just not that common an experience in the broad landscape of this continent, sad to say. I suspect it's nearly impossible for others to know us to the degree it might take to do

characters justice. I've been moving in and out of the reservation world for a long time. I witness a lot of interactions. Even with people who've been long married into reservation families, a slightly different dynamic often occurs when they're present as opposed to, let's say, the exchanges at an "all Indian affair."

The Indian communities I've experienced tend to be pretty insular places. Though I'm Onondaga and grew up at the Tuscarora Nation, fully immersed in a Territories culture, I can't imagine narrative "tribe-hopping," myself, say, writing with depth about Seneca characters, despite the fact that we're culturally and geographically very closely related. I have a number of Seneca friends, but I wouldn't presume to speak for their experiences. I think that's a Seneca writer's territory. This says nothing about the complex relationship of "oppressor wanting to write about the oppressed," when white writers have the desire to compose Indian stories. Haven't we had enough taken away from us that we could safely assume our stories should remain our own?

All those things said, if a writer were still compelled to write about Indian characters, I would suggest treating those characters as humans, with the range of qualities they might give any other character. When I see Indian characters in the work of non-Indian writers, the most common qualities I see are stereotypical. This isn't news, naturally. Less often these days, they're negative stereotypes, but a positive stereotype is still reductive and dehumanizing.

I, personally, have been described in writer profiles as: "proud, noble, stoic, meditative, environmentally sensitive, spiritual, mystical." To the limited degree that I have a public persona, I do not put those qualities out there at all, and in some cases, those modifiers are wholly projections of someone else's ideas concerning Indians. I'm human, with all the failings and indulgent behaviors other humans have. My friends can attest to this.

Just as an example of the ways I'm not that Indian stereotype would be the cars I have owned. My family couldn't afford a car for most of my younger life. I had to walk, a lot, if I wanted to go anywhere, even to get to college on a daily basis. I didn't bother getting my license until I was nearly twenty-one, as there was no point. That experience has colored my adulthood. Once I'd secured a decent job, I've consistently driven impractical performance cars, based solely on my passion, taste,

and financial freedom. I'm not adverse to being environmentally conscious, but driving a Prius is not a major desire in my life. I remember the year they first arrived, and every Prius I saw was green. That kind of symbolism could not be accidental. Those cars seemed as much about making a statement as any other car. I choose to make a different statement. I'm not actively destructive, naturally, I'm not Big Industry, but I am an unrepentant pleasure consumer.

Are there Indian environmental activists? Of course, but it's not a REQUIREMENT. And yet, some readers of this interview might be scandalized by these statements. "An Indian said these things???" That broad American idea that Indians are all environmentalists doesn't necessarily even originate from within our communities. It's some strange inadvertent legacy of those vintage "Keep America Beautiful" commercials with the crying fake Indian. You know, I'm not the guy throwing greasy McDonald's bags out the car window, but neither am I the guy in beaded buckskin paddling my canoe around town. I am not apologizing to my hybrid-driving Whole Foods-shopping friends for the choices I make. Fortunately for me, they have senses of humor and find it amusing when they've seen me described in ways that totally contradict who they know me to be. In some ways, it's given us safe doorways to talk about the narrow parameters of representation of Indians in the culture.

**DiYA: Did you have a particular audience in mind when you wrote this book? Why or why not?**

**EG:** I certainly hope it has broad appeal of course. That said, I knew right off that I'd hoped Indian kids would find it, particularly those in the first stages of the navigations between their communities and the broader world. There aren't many stories of this sort out there, and I hope this offers a little variety, another take on the experience. Beyond that audience, though, when I started working on the novel, I discovered that I'd avoided drawing on my junior high experience in the twenty or so years I've been publishing fiction. That avoidance was a powerful window to my understanding of that era's impact.

I hadn't forgotten junior high — I explicitly did not want to go back there. Three years is such a short span in your life, and yet, junior high is where the first big life overhaul happens. Our more permanent interests emerge, we begin asserting individual tastes, our bodies change, and consequently, our relationships with others change — it's like hunting for a series of treasure chests buried in a minefield,

without having the benefit a map. Good or bad, those upheavals are major stressors that we often feel we're facing alone.

The novel's original title was a euphemism for lying, because I knew that evasiveness was a major source of tension Lewis was going to have to face. There are things at our cores that we can't tell even our closest friends, and we have to endure them, alone. If there's a particular broader audience that I hope finds this book, it is those people who have been there: young folks currently in the middle of that phase, and older ones for whom that isolation was profoundly challenging. I hope the novel does what books often have done for me, lets them feel a little less alone in the world. Thanks again for the opportunity to explore some of these ideas.

# A Half-Life of Cardio-Pulmonary Function

BY ERIC GANSWORTH

I used to think  
that if I loved hard  
enough and long enough  
passion would always win out

like the way I loved  
cologne, venturing teenaged into  
congested malls, abusing testers  
only a salesperson surly enough

inquiring if he or she could help  
me in any way, spitting  
the prices of even the smallest  
bottles of the scents I had

slathered on, forcing me out  
in a cloud of confidence  
that I was the Calvin Klein  
Man, not the Old Spice

Man, not the Zest  
Man, and certainly not  
the My Drafty House Is Warmed Badly  
by Kerosene Heaters Man

impervious to my real  
life where I would sneak  
down in the middle  
of the night, passing

snow collecting  
on the inside of the window  
sill, trying to descend  
the stairs silently

to complete the night lying  
before the stove's vents blowing  
sooty warm air deep into my  
sleeping lungs, clutching

a broken lacrosse stick  
to intimidate rats so brazen

our housecats accepted  
them as equal occupants

until I exit those automatic  
doors, leave fountains where  
just out of range I envy white  
families tossing entire

cigarette packs' worth  
of what they call spare  
change, wishing for things  
they could already buy if they wanted

laughing as those presidential  
faces fall sometimes up  
and sometimes down, all drowning  
in three inches of chlorinated well water

return to the reservation  
where my sister-  
in-law embraces me later  
the same day, drawing

deeply, saying she loves  
the scent of burned heating  
oil on men, that it reminds  
her of when she and my brother

dated and she would hold  
him long in those last moments  
before allowing him to walk out  
her door, meander through snowy

grooves, finding his way home  
while she looked out windows  
where ice crystals gathered  
on the proper side of the pane

holding her breath as long as she  
dared, letting his presence seep  
out only when she could no longer  
bear, leaving him to be a vapor ghost

on her window, a fog sure  
to vanish even before she turned  
from the window and here I am  
years later living in that same

state, you miles away and I,  
knowing how presence disperses  
into air, wonder how long  
I can hold my breath.