

NOT EXACTLY NORMAL

Written by Devin Brown

He was always so normal!

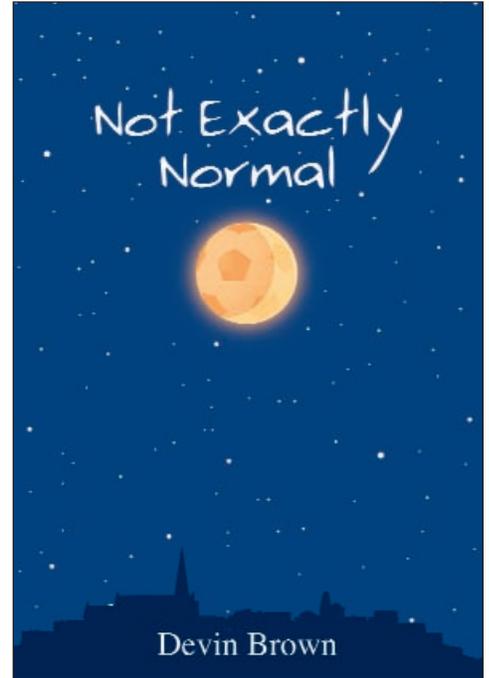
Todd Farrel attends St. Luke's Episcopal School in rural New England. Each year the sixth graders finish winter term with their big social studies reports. Wanting to make his report something special this year, Todd finally decides to write about mystical experiences—something definitely not normal. After doing some research, Todd determines that he needs to have his own mystical experience.

While practicing soccer moves with his best friend, Nitro, listening to an unusual teacher who encourages original thinking, and giving in to his curiosity about Leda, the intelligent but bizarre girl from California, Todd discovers some pretty extraordinary aspects to life in his ordinary world.



THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

- ❖ Diversity
- ❖ Individuality
- ❖ Friendship
- ❖ Heroism
- ❖ Family relationships
- ❖ Compassion



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VOCABULARY

Look up the definitions of the words *normal* and *unique*. Do you consider these words to be negative or positive? Can a person be both normal and unique?



THINGS TO THINK ABOUT BEFORE READING THE BOOK

1. Is there someone you know that people might say is bizarre? Do you think people would use this word if they knew this person better? Can you think of a better word to use to describe this person?

2. What are some ways you are like everyone else? What are some ways you are different? Do you consider yourself normal, unique, or both?

3. Have you ever had to write a report for class? Do writing assignments stress you out? Why or why not?

4. Have you ever had a dangerous experience, or a brush with death, or just been really sick? Did it change the way you think about things? If so, how?

5. Do some research about mysticism and mystical experiences. What do you think about mystical experiences? Have you ever had one? Would you like to have one?



QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON AFTER READING THE BOOK

1. Mr. Phillips reads John Donne's famous phrase *no man is an island* and then asks, "Do you believe that?" How would you respond to Mr. Phillips' question?

2. Which not-exactly-normal people, places, ideas, or things in the book did you like most?

3. By the end of the book, Todd feels differently about Leda. What brings about this change?

ACTIVITIES

1. Mr. Phillips asks the class to write about something that has to do with a hero or heroes. Write a paragraph describing your favorite hero. Tell what makes him or her a hero to you. This can be someone you know or someone you have heard or read about.

2. Todd is able to score a goal in soccer because he had practiced. When Nitro falls through the ice, Todd is able to save him because he has been taking swimming lessons and has been swimming extra laps afterwards. Write a paragraph describing something that you practice or would like to practice.

3. Leda has quite a large vocabulary and uses an unusual word almost every time she talks. Pick three unusual words that Leda uses and look them up. Write down the definitions and then write three sentences of your own using one word in each.

4. Todd learns a lot from the adults in his life — from Mr. Phillips, Pastor Jill, and from his parents. Write a sentence or two describing an adult in your life who has influenced you. Then write a few lines about what you have learned from this person.

5. In chapter eight, Todd makes a rubbing of a tombstone. Find something interesting and make your own rubbing from it. Incorporate some words into your rubbing.

6. In Todd's report he says, "Parents are always saying be thankful, like for food and clothes and lots of stuff. It never means much until one day when you realize how important everything ordinary is." Make a collage of things you are thankful for, using photographs, magazine pictures, and colored paper. (You can use actual photographs, but you can also use pictures that represent the people and things you want to show.)

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ABOUT *the Author*

Devin Brown is an English professor at Asbury College in Lexington, Kentucky, where he lives with his wife Sharon and their 15-pound cat Mr. Fluff. *Not Exactly Normal* combines several of Devin's own major interests: sports, philosophy, history, religion, and literature.



Devin is also the author of *Inside Narnia: A Guide to Exploring The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Baker).



PRAISE FOR *Not Exactly Normal*

“Brown’s debut novel serves up some dynamic kid characters . . . and stirs up some thought-provoking issues for them to consider.”

— *Publishers Weekly*

“A quiet, meaningful first novel.”

— *Booklist*

If you have any other suggestions for using *Not Exactly Normal* with young readers, we would be happy to hear from you.

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