

FREE LUNCH

EXTRAS

BY REX OGLE



AUTHOR Q&A

In the book, Rex spends a lot of time thinking about and describing food. What was your favorite food when you were in sixth grade? What's your favorite food now?

Crunchy tacos! Perhaps it's the Texan in me, but I could have eaten tacos every single day—as long as there weren't any tomatoes on them. (I love salsa but hate tomatoes. Go figure!) Mom never cooked, but sometimes we stopped by Taco Bell to get a taco six-pack for the family.

Honorable mentions go out to fried mozzarella sticks, ice cream, and cake. Those were all luxuries, but when I had them, I couldn't have been happier.

As an adult, I still love tacos. I make myself tacos a few times a month. The best part? I'm allowed to eat as many as I want. ☺

What's your favorite comic book series and do you have a favorite superhero? Why?

X-Men all the way! As you read in the book, my best friend introduced me to the *Uncanny X-Men* and *New Mutants*, and I immediately fell in love. They had amazing super powers and went on incredible adventures around the world (and in space!), but the reason I kept going back was because they protected a world that feared and hated them.

At the time, I felt like I was hated too—by kids at school and certain members of my family. I had an especially confusing relationship with my mom, yet I still wanted to help her. I can't count the number of times I went to sleep wishing for superpowers, thinking if I had them, maybe I could help others, and myself.

My favorite superhero as a kid is still my favorite superhero now. Her name is Illyana Rasputin, a.k.a. Magik. She teleports through time and space. I always wanted her powers so I could get away from my life. But the real reason I identified with her is she spent her childhood lost in a demonic realm called Limbo. Even though she lived through horrible things, she stayed strong and kept fighting to be a good person. I really looked up to her for that.

When did you know you wanted to write?

When I was younger, I desperately wanted to be an artist like Gustav Klimt or Alphonse Mucha or Jim Lee or Chris Bachalo. I took every art class my school offered, and I tried so so so so so hard. But I was never very good. One day, an art teacher asked me about the inspiration for my pieces. I started in on this very long, very in-depth high-fantasy story. My teacher listened, smiled, and said, "That's quite an imagination—have you ever thought about writing down your ideas?" She even let me write in art class. Once I started writing, I couldn't stop.

Why did you decide to tell the specific and difficult story of your sixth grade experience?

As a kid, I often looked for books about people like me—broke, scared, dealing with heavy stuff at home . . . I couldn't find anything that spoke about those topics. That reinforced my feelings about being embarrassed of who I was and where I came from. As a young writer, I didn't want people knowing about my childhood, so I kept that stuff to myself.

One day, when I was riding on the subway in New York City, I saw a little girl tug on her mom's sleeve and heard her say, "I'm hungry." Her mom hugged her, but didn't say anything. I didn't know their situation, but it struck me that my story needed to be shared. I wanted other kids to know that it's okay to be hungry. That they are not alone. And there is hope.

You could have written a fictionalized version of this story, but you chose to write it as a memoir. Why?

To be honest, the first time I tried to write this story, I positioned it as a comedy. I kept trying to make a joke about being poor, about having a difficult home life. It felt wrong though, like I was laughing at myself. But I kept thinking, "No one wants to read a sad story." Luckily, a close friend kept saying, "People don't always need to laugh. Sometimes, it's okay to hurt."

In my personal life, I believe "Honesty is the best policy." So I applied that to my writing. It took me a long time

to write the first draft, almost two years, because it was uncomfortable, and made me deeply sad to revisit those memories. When I was finished though, I was really happy with what I'd written.

Was there anything you decided to leave out?

There were quite a few bits I left out. They weren't essential to tell this story. For example, there were a lot more fights between my stepdad, my mom, and me. Some were just yelling. Some of them were more violent. But I don't think I needed to include every battle to convey what I lived through. I wanted to give a full picture of my life. That meant including home, school, family, friendships, and so on.

There was one story thread—a very important one in the development of who I am as a person—that I pulled from the book entirely (except for a single mention). I wanted to include it, but decided it needed more attention. In that regard, it's become the central focus for my next project.

What were some of your favorite books in middle school? What are your favorites now?

As you know, I loved *X-Men* and *New Mutants*. But I also was going through a “classics” phase, reading titles like *A Wrinkle in Time*, *The Giver*, *Hatchet*, and *Little Women*. This was also around the time that I discovered *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which I adored. I was also reading a lot of *Hardy Boys* and R.L. Stine's *Fear Street* series. I really began to love

horror and fantasy, which led me back to more classics, like Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. From there, I started reading Stephen King. It was a little too mature for me at the time, but I think it helped offer me perspective on my own life.

I'm still an avid reader, devouring everything from adult to children's titles. And I'm still reading a ton of comics—some of the most creative and unique stories are being created in that space by people like Jonathan Hickman, Rick Remender, and Brian K. Vaughan. I'm absolutely thrilled to see so many middle-grade graphic novels taking root, so I go after every title by folks like Noelle Stevenson, Raina Telgemeier, Mariko Tamaki, and Jeffrey Brown (to name just a few). I also read a lot of prose, but I skew toward young adult. My favorites include Jason Reynolds and his *Track* series, as well as *Harry Potter* and (this should be no surprise) *The Hunger Games*.

When you aren't writing, what are some things you like to do?

But I'm always writing! (Or reading.) Haha. When I take the occasional break, I really enjoy hiking with my friends and my dog. I usually go on big group nature meets once a week. We also like to play video games and board games. I think it's a nice way to laugh with your friends and have an adventure that gets you outside of your head. To relax, I also like to cook. Growing up, we ate a lot of junk food and fast food. As I got older, I realized I needed to take better care of

my body. So I do my own shopping and try to balance my diet with healthy salads and organic treats. Though I still have a weakness for cookies and cake.

If you could say one thing to everyone who reads your book, what would it be?

“If your story is similar to mine—or even if it’s not, whatever you’re going through—YOU ARE NOT ALONE.” As a child, I always felt I was. Sometimes I still feel that way. It’s the worst feeling in the world. But none of us are truly alone. There are people and services that can help us. Sometimes we just have to reach out. I’d also add, “It is okay to live under the poverty line. It doesn’t make you less than others. It just makes you different. And different is okay.” The stigma of being poor in our country can be daunting. But no child should feel like they have less worth because of the situation they were born into.

What’s it like to know this personal story of yours is out there for anyone to read?

It’s both super scary and super exciting to have my story in the public eye. My one true hope is that it helps someone—even if it’s just a handful of people—and lets them know they are not alone, and it’s okay to be poor. It does not define you.

The first part of sixth grade was a very tough time for Rex. When and why did things start to get any easier for him?

There was no single defining moment, but I suspect it's when I realized I had to stop focusing on all the things I *didn't* have, and started focusing on all the things I *did* have. I had a roof over my head, I had clothes, and I had food—even if it wasn't always much. That's more than a lot of people have, and so I tried to be grateful for it. Of course, it was easy to forget these big revelations when I wanted to look cool in front of others.

Do you think there's such a thing as a free lunch?

That's a really good question. The first part of me wants to say, "Nothing's free!" But I think that's the ghost of my old self. Over the course of my lifetime, I've been treated to many meals and treated others to meals as well, and for no reason. It wasn't because I wanted anything. Sometimes, friendship and kind conversation is enough to want to share a meal with someone.

Can you tell us more about Rex and Ethan's friendship? How did they help each other?

I can't speak for Ethan, but for me, that friendship was invaluable. He taught me what true friendship was. It wasn't about wearing the right clothes or saying the right things. It was

about just being true to myself. We read comics, we talked about philosophy, geeked out over sci-fi. (He was a *Star Trek* fan, while I loved *Star Wars*.) Ethan didn't judge me—which is an amazing trait in someone so young. In turn, he taught me to be less judgmental of others and of myself.

It's been a number of years since you were a middle schooler. Do you think it's any easier to navigate sixth grade today than it was for you? Do you think it might be harder?

It's definitely not easier! I think middle school will always be a hard time for people. There's so much to juggle—school, homework, friends, family—not to mention our bodies and minds are changing rapidly. If anything, it's probably harder to be a middle schooler now. I suspect technology and social media make it easier to connect but also easier to stay at home rather than spend time with people IRL. Plus, it steals some key elements of privacy. Kids can be cruel, and social media makes it easier for bullies if they want to embarrass you or say hurtful things. I imagine if *Free Lunch* took place today, my story would already be online whether I wanted it to be or not!

Do you have a favorite scene in the book? Why is it your favorite?

There are two chapters that stand out to me. The first is "Bruises." It's definitely one of the darker chapters, but it felt like such a perfect snapshot of my childhood. The walk home

from school, the superstition about stepping on a crack, and my concern over a mother who didn't seem so concerned about me. And then there's the moment in her room. That revelation of the lack of color in her life was so depressing and upsetting to me as a boy. It has always haunted me.

My second favorite scene is much happier, in "Christmas Tree." It was one of the first times that my family felt normal. Out shopping for trees, smelling the different kinds, trying to decide which has the perfect shape. And of course my stepdad's "pull my finger" gag backfiring. My editor wasn't a fan of that scene, but I had to keep it in because it's one of those moments that brought me so much laughter for years to come. I think it's good to remember the bad with the good and the good with the bad. Life is rarely completely one or the other, so it's good to embrace both.

Are you working on any new books or articles?

I am working on a few different projects. Most of my them are much lighter in tone, or steeped in high fantasy or science fiction. I write a lot of graphic novels (under various pseudonyms) too. But the one I'm most proud of is something of a sequel to *Free Lunch*. It takes a closer look at domestic violence. Abuse is a hard subject and one that's not easy to talk about, especially for younger readers—which makes it feel even more important to me now. Statistics show that women and children are exposed to domestic violence more

frequently than most would think. It's horrifying to see the numbers. And so I truly believe it's another important story to tell.

Do you have any favorite writing advice or tips to share?

Don't give up! Haha. I say that because writing is definitely something you have to commit to. Especially if you want to write a whole book. What I've learned over the years is that writing is like training for a marathon. You don't wake up one day suddenly able to run twenty-six miles. You have to practice and train. That means you start small. Maybe run half a mile. Then a full mile. Then two miles. You have to build up to running long distances. But if you keep it up, and you work hard at it, then before you know it, you'll have written a whole book. And if you're anything like me, once you've finished your first, you'll be excited to start your second!

DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. In “Coupons,” Rex feels bad for the wonky shopping cart at the store and decides to use it. Why does he make that choice?
2. What does Rex mean when he says in “Coupons,” “But for some reason, things cost a whole lot more when you’re poor?”
3. Why does Rex’s English teacher, Mrs. Winstead, jump to the conclusion that he can’t be reading a 1,000-page novel? What does it show us about her?
4. Why do you think Rex likes to read stories about the end of the world (“Free Reading”)?
5. In “White Rabbit” why does Rex hide his action figures from Benny’s older brother? Why might he like hanging out with Benny, who is two years younger and plays with toys?
6. Rex wonders if he’s a rabbit or a snake in “White Rabbit.” Which do you think he is? Do you agree with him that most kids are rabbits? Why?
7. What do you think about Rex’s mother’s argument that lying about bad service is okay because she’s getting free meals from mega-rich fast food companies (“Fast Food”)?
8. Why do you think Rex is so bothered by the wasp that can’t find its way out of the apartment (“Bugs”)?

9. Rex spends a lot of his time taking care of his little brother, Ford, and has a lot of responsibility for him, which he takes seriously. Do you think there are ways that Ford also takes care of Rex? What are some good moments that they share together?
10. Food plays a major role in this story. Why is that? What did you notice about Rex's descriptions of food?
11. In "Superheroes," Ethan asks Rex, "But if the good guys kill, what's the difference between them and the evil people?" How would you answer Ethan?
12. In "Turkey," Rex says about his mother, "Her insanity is contagious." What do you think he means when he says this?
13. Have you ever had an adult—a teacher, a friend's parent—judge you by your appearance? What does that feel like? In "Spelling," Rex finds a constructive but direct way to express his frustration with Mrs. Winstead's assumptions about him. Why do you think he forgives Mrs. Winstead so quickly after she apologizes?
14. Rex's mother always seems to be cleaning, whether it's vacuuming, doing the laundry and ironing, or scrubbing the kitchen. What does that show us about her? Rex thinks she loves cleaning and hates germs. Why else might she be cleaning?
15. Why do you think Ethan befriends Rex? How are he and Rex different? And what do they have in common ("Christmas Tree")?

16. Rex spends most of the book worrying about everything he doesn't have, whether it's clothes, food, or loving parents. Before he receives his present on Christmas morning, though, he decides to focus on what he does have. How might it help Rex in the future?
17. Rex has a complicated relationship with his stepfather, Sam. Why do you think Sam gives Rex the surprise Christmas present? What does it mean to Rex?
18. Abuela doesn't appear very often in the story, but she is still an important character. What is her influence on Rex? How does she affect him even when she's not with him?
19. By the end of the story, which character has changed the most?
20. "There's no such thing as a free lunch" is a common saying. What do you think that means? Do you think Rex feels the Free Lunch Program at school is really free?

WRITING GUIDE

Life can be fantastic, filled with fun and laughter, but it can also be difficult and overwhelming. Whatever your life is like, you might try writing about it. Changing thoughts into words, and words into stories, can help life feel a little lighter. I know when I write, things start to make a little more sense.

Writing is about organizing your feelings and taking a moment to reflect. It's not always easy to write down the bad stuff. But after I do, I always feel better, and it's good to get things out of your system. Here are some tips on writing your own stories about what's going on in your life.

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO WRITE ABOUT?

Maybe you want to write about something bad that happened to you in the past, or something happy that happened to you today. Maybe you simply want to share your hopes for something that will happen in the future. There's no wrong answer here.

HOW DO YOU WANT TO WRITE YOUR STORY?

Next, you need to decide how you want to write. Do you want to write in poetry? Or in prose? Do you want the story to be from your point of view, or do you want to tell the story from a third-person perspective? Remember, this is *your* story. You make the rules!

WHERE (AND WHEN) DOES THIS STORY TAKE PLACE?

This is an important one because you want your reader to “see” the setting when they read your words. If the story takes place on the beach, describe the sand and the salt in the air. If it takes place in space, make sure your hero wears a spacesuit. If it takes place during cowboy times, maybe your hero will ride a horse.

WHAT IS THE BEGINNING, MIDDLE, AND END OF YOUR STORY?

If this is a long story, you might want to imagine what the “movie trailer” would look like. Then write down those ideas. Is there lots of action? Or is this more of a heartfelt story? Map what happens from start to finish.

WRITE AN OUTLINE!

This might be the most important bit of advice I can offer. If you write an outline first, it’ll help you along the way, because you’ll know which direction you’re going. The more work you do earlier, the less you have to do later.

START WRITING!

Now it’s time to start writing. This part will take the longest, but don’t rush it, and don’t stress over every single word and sentence. If it helps, just let it all out and write down everything.

BE HONEST.

This might seem easy, but it can actually be very hard. The first time I tried to write my story, I wanted to be the nicest person in the book. But that wasn't accurate. To be honest, I had to show my character being a jerk sometimes. Sometimes bad people are nice, and sometimes nice people are bad. No one is 100 percent evil or 100 percent good. The truth lies somewhere in the middle.

THE FIVE SENSES.

When you're writing any story, you want to paint a picture for the reader. The best way to do that is to address the five senses. If your main character goes into a garden, what does it smell like? How does the sun feel on their skin? Are there any sounds? The more sensory information you can add, the more realistic it will be for the reader.

WHEN YOU'RE DONE . . . TAKE A BREAK!

Once you have written your story, give yourself some time off. Pat yourself on the back and treat yourself to something fun. When you're ready, come back to it. It'll be waiting for you.

REVISE.

This is the place where you read it and make corrections. First, do a creative edit. That means, focus on the story and the way you wrote it. Does each sentence (and paragraph) make sense? Are you

saying what you meant to say? Are there any details you could add to make the story feel deeper, or more realistic?

Once you do that, take one more pass, and check for spelling errors and punctuation mistakes. If you find a lot, don't beat yourself up. When I'm writing, I still confuse *they're*, *there*, and *their* sometimes. A lot of times I write so fast, I make silly spelling errors. No writer is perfect.

DON'T BE AFRAID OF REJECTION.

Sharing your writing might be the scariest part of the whole process. It's okay to be nervous. If you don't want to share it, if you want to keep it private, that's okay too. Some stories can be just for you. If you do decide to share your work, remember that hard times are not only tough to write about; they can be tough to read about, too, especially for people who lived through them. The most important thing is to pick a reader you trust, and one you feel safe with. That might not be a family member (it certainly wouldn't have been for me), so please be careful about this. Your safety is the most important thing!

BE OPEN TO NOTES.

If you do share, then be ready to hear people's thoughts and opinions. Some people may offer "constructive criticism," which means they are being critical to be helpful. Their advice might be terrible, but it might also be great. Just stay open to new ideas. Remember, some people will love your story, and others won't, and that's okay.

FINAL PIECE OF ADVICE.

If you want to know the key to being a great writer, it's really quite simple: **READ, READ, READ!** The more you read other people's books, the better you'll learn to craft and shape your own stories. After all, the best writers are great readers.

BEST OF LUCK,
REX OGLE

RESOURCES

Web addresses appearing in this book reflect existing links as of the date of first publication. No endorsement of, or affiliation with, any third party website should be inferred. W. W. Norton & Co., Inc. is not responsible for third party content (website, blog, information page, or otherwise).

If you or someone you know is experiencing hunger, depression, anxiety, or domestic violence, please know that *you are not alone*, and *there is help*. There are people who are trained to listen without judgment and to connect you with resources or information you need.

As of the date of this writing, the services listed below are free and are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. The information I've included here comes from the internet (meaning that I don't have personal experience with each of these organizations and can't guarantee results) but I hope this list is a helpful starting place.

Hunger Free America

Resource for individuals or families seeking information on how to obtain food, and connects callers with emergency food providers in their community, assistance programs, and social services.

1-866-3-HUNGRY (for English)

1-877-8-HAMBRE (for Spanish)

www.hungerfreeamerica.org

www.hungerfreeamerica.org/food-map

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Provides free, confidential, 24/7 services for individuals or families facing mental and/or substance use disorders.

1-800-662-HELP (4357)

www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Provides 24/7, free, and confidential support to people in emotional distress or suicide crisis.

1-800-273-8255

www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

National Domestic Violence Hotline

Provides lifesaving tools and immediate support to enable victims to find safety and live lives free of abuse.

1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

www.thehotline.org