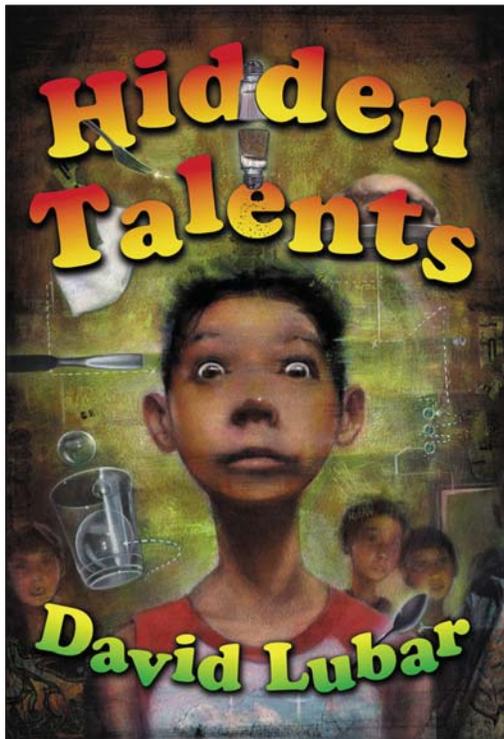




David Lubar

Hidden Talents



“Lubar serves up great fun.”

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



PHOTO: JOELLE LUBAR

David Lubar grew up in Morristown, New Jersey. His books include *Flip*, a VOYA Best Book of the Year, *In the Land of the Lawn Weenies*, and *Invasion of the Road Weenies*, two collections of spooky-funny tales. You can visit him on the web at www.davidlubar.com.

ABOUT HIDDEN TALENTS

Martin Anderson has been sent to Edgeview, otherwise known as the “end of the line.” This alternative school for children with extreme discipline problems can be characterized in many ways: a broken-down wreck, a misguided experiment, a last resort. Martin begins his stay certain that the place is all of these things. His roommate, Torchie, can’t stop setting fires but refuses to admit it. The rest of his new-found gang includes a petty thief, a test cheater, and a guy who throws stuff—such as books, plates, silverware—around without warning. Martin doesn’t understand his unusual companions. He isn’t sure how to keep clear of a bully nicknamed “Bloodbath.” Perhaps most confusing to Martin is exactly how he himself wound up in this strange place.

Although his brash, incisive outspokenness gets Martin into trouble at Edgeview just as it did at his previous schools, he also begins to wonder about things. Maybe Torchie really isn’t setting fires on purpose. Maybe Cheater isn’t actually cheating on tests. But can Martin convince these kids that the behaviors that have caused them to be labeled troublemakers may in fact be hidden talents? Suddenly what began as Martin’s attempt to fit in with a bunch of misfits becomes an exploration of the paranormal and a study of psychic abilities. And the place Martin saw as his final destination offers him a window into his own hidden talent, and an opportunity for a new beginning.

As it explores a world where kids can move objects with their minds, start fires with their dreams, and hear the thoughts of others, *Hidden Talents* fits neatly within the fantasy novel spectrum. Yet, read on another plane, this sharp, funny, boarding school tale is also a forceful, fiery, fork-flying allegory about the way we discover our inner core and the secrets we try to keep—even from ourselves.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The information, activities, and discussion questions which follow are intended to enhance your reading of *Hidden Talents*. Please feel free to adapt these materials to suit your needs and interests.

WRITING AND RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

I. PAPERWORK

A. While much of the novel is written from Martin Anderson’s first-person perspective, the text of *Hidden Talents* is peppered with memoranda, writing exercises, drawings, poems, and letters written by other characters. What insights do these bits of “paperwork” lend to the story? Select a favorite “paperwork” excerpt and identify its author. Does your understanding of this character change when you consider their writing excerpt along with the information written from Martin’s perspective? Explain this change.

B. Keep a paper trail of your day, noting homework lists, writing assignments, school memos, notes, lists, newspapers, magazines, and other written material you encounter. What papers had the biggest effect on your day? Which were least significant? Write a short paragraph or poem describing your reaction to the paperwork in your life.

C. Memos from Principal Davis are found throughout *Hidden Talents*. What do you think of these memos? Write your own memo encouraging friends or classmates to recycle paper, to be on time for school, or to perform another positive activity. Will your memo attempt to persuade through encouragement or by threatening consequences? Will your memo be long or short, funny or serious? Read your finished memo aloud to friends or classmates and discuss their reactions. What challenges does memo-writing pose?

D. Write a one to three paragraph description of yourself, including such details as your name, age, talents, and favorite activities.

E. On a large piece of paper, create a paperwork collage about yourself. Include such written material as notes, letters, award certificates, stories or journal entries you have written, and school reports. Does this collage or your descriptive paragraph from the previous exercise (I-D) better depict the real you? Explain your answer.

II. EDGEVIEW SCHOOL

A. Edgeview School is a fairly unusual place. Go to your library or online to learn more about the history of public schools in the United States, their purpose and goals, and the public school system in your community. Do alternative schools like Edgeview exist? Present your findings in a short oral report.

B. In the character of one of the Edgeview teachers, write a short essay describing your background, teaching techniques, and reasons for working at Edgeview. Are you happy or unhappy? How would you define success as a teacher and as a person? Do you believe Edgeview is your final destination?

C. Create a brochure describing Edgeview School to prospective students, their families, and the community. If possible, design and illustrate your brochure on a computer.

D. Write the script for a short scene in which Principal Davis discusses his thoughts about which student can best represent Edgeview before the State Inspection Committee with some Edgeview teachers. If possible, perform your scene with friends or classmates.

E. Hold a debate arguing the pro’s and con’s of Edgeview as a final alternative—with no possible return to their home school after the initial evaluation period—for unruly kids. Then, draft your own plan revising Edgeview’s student evaluation, discipline, and long-term enrollment systems.

III. NICKNAMES

A. Nicknames play an important role in *Hidden Talents*. Go to the library or online to research nicknames of famous people from history. Make a list of at least five interesting nicknames you find, accompanied by brief explanations of how the nicknames were acquired. If desired, make similar nickname lists for celebrities, athletes, or even family members. What can nicknames reveal about people?

B. Create a chart listing the given names, nicknames (if available), and a short character description for the Edgeview students depicted in *Hidden Talents*.

C. Do you have a nickname? Write a paragraph explaining how you got your nickname, who calls you by this name, and your feelings about your nickname. Alternatively, write a paragraph about a nickname you would like to have or why you would not like to be called by a nickname.

IV. TALENTS

A. Make a list of the paranormal talents Martin discovers in his friends. Then draw a cartoon in which Martin's friends experiment with their talents.

B. Imagine you are Martin, about to explain your paranormal observations to Torchie and the gang. In the character of Martin, write a journal entry describing your plan to reveal your discoveries to your friends and how you think they will feel. Use the word "talent" in your journal entry.

C. Imagine you are Torchie. Write a script in which you explain to Martin why you and the others are unhappy about what he has said. Or write a script in which you try to persuade Lucky, Cheater, and Flinch to be friends with Martin once again. Use the word "talent" in your script.

D. Distribute large index cards to a group of friends or classmates. Have each person write his or her name at the top of a card. Pass the cards from one person to the next, giving each person the opportunity to note one talent for the person named at the top of the card they hold. Talents can be noted in such areas as athletic or artistic ability, community spirit, or leadership skills.

V. DIFFERENCES

A. *Hidden Talents* is filled with observations of the differences between such groups as town kids and "Edgies," teachers and students, regular schools and Edgeview. On a large sheet of paper, write the names of a pair of "opposing" groups, such as those listed here or another pair observed in the story. Then create two lists, one noting the differences between the groups, and another listing their similarities.

B. Have you ever been uncomfortable near a person because he or she was different from you? Write a short essay describing this experience.

C. What makes you different? Create a drawing, collage, or other artwork depicting this difference. Or write a paragraph explaining how you feel about your difference.

D. Go to the library or online to learn about a historical figure who thought differently from his or her peers in the realm of science, politics, or art, such as Galileo Galilei, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, or Pablo Picasso. Prepare a short report describing why this person was viewed as different,

how they were treated because of their different views, and how people think of them today.

V. THE UNEXPLAINED

A. Go to your library or online to learn what scientists think about paranormal phenomena. Then create a twenty-question survey asking people whether they believe in mental telepathy, UFOs, and mysterious or paranormal phenomena. Present your compiled results to friends or classmates.

B. Find a definition for the term "syzygy." How does Martin apply this term to people in the chapter entitled "Blow Up" near the end of Part Three of *Hidden Talents*? Try using other scientific words, such as "orbit" or "synergy," in a paragraph about people. Can you use terms associated with painting, poetry, mathematics, music, or another area of arts or academia to create a unique description or explanation of human behaviors?

C. Go to the library or online to learn more about Zenner cards, developed by perceptual psychologist Karl Zenner. Then try the Zenner card experiment with friends or classmates. Compile and discuss your results.

D. Write a short story in which a surprising or frightening incident can be explained scientifically, or by a series of easily observed coincidences. Write a second story in which the same incident is the result of a paranormal phenomenon.

E. Do you believe in mental telepathy? Write a paragraph explaining why you believe, or do not believe, in such a phenomenon. If desired, collect similar paragraphs from friends or classmates, add drawings, newspaper articles, and other material to create a display entitled "Exploring the Unexplained."

F. Imagine that you possess a paranormal "talent." Write a journal entry describing a day in your life and how it is affected by your unusual ability.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Reread the first four pages of *Hidden Talents*. What do you think of the narrator and his circumstances at this point in the novel? Do you like him or dislike him? Do you think he is a good kid or a bad kid?

2. How do Martin's mother and father feel about their son? How do you think they made the decision to send Martin to Edgeview? Does Martin ever receive letters from home? Who sends these letters? What do the unfinished, unsent letters from the Anderson home tell you about this family?

3. By sending him to Edgeview, Martin's parents seem to have given up on him. Have you ever felt like those around you have given up on you in some way? Describe this experience.
4. What is Martin's first impression of Torchie? List at least three ways first impressions play an important role—or serve as important motif—in the novel. Do you believe first impressions are usually right or wrong? Explain your answer.
5. Who are the members of Torchie's group? What is important about their Friday night adventures?
6. Is Martin concerned about not being accepted very quickly into Torchie's group? Why or why not?
7. What are the differences and similarities between Bloodbath and Torchie? What are the differences and similarities between Bloodbath and Martin?
8. How is Edgeview like any other school? In what ways is it different?
9. Would you like to attend Miss Nomad's class? Do you think you would enjoy studying with Mr. Briggs? How would you define the job of a teacher at Edgeview? How is this job similar to, or different from, the job of a teacher at your school?
10. Find and reread the memoranda written about Martin throughout the novel. What do these notes tell you about Martin? What do these notes tell you about their authors?
11. Find and reread the letters, self-descriptions and other matter written by Torchie, Cheater, Flinch, Lucky, and Bloodbath. Do these characters believe that they are bad individuals? How does their written work compare or contrast with their behavior or with their parents', friends', and teachers' impressions of them?
12. List the many nicknames given to characters throughout the book. What is the importance of nicknames in the story? Which characters are not given nicknames and why do you think this is the case?
13. What is funny about the memos written by Principal Davis? What is sad about the memos? What do you think of the character of Principal Davis?
14. How does Martin finally make sense of his new friends' strange behavior? Do you believe in precognition, telepathy, or other psychic phenomena? Why or why not?
15. Do you think Torchie, Cheater, and the rest truly did not realize their psychic powers before Martin pointed them out? Explain your answer.
16. How do Martin's friends initially feel about him after he points out their "talents"? How do they begin to take control of their power? How do their efforts make them feel?
17. Imagine that you had a psychic power such as mental telepathy. What would be the advantages and disadvantages, pleasures and perils, of such a power? How might having this power affect your life?
18. Why do you think Cheater suggests Mr. Briggs' class explore mental telepathy? How does Cheater give himself away with the Zenner cards?
19. Why do Martin and his friends try to save Edgeview from closure? How do Martin's friends help him decide what to do before the State Inspection Committee? What sacrifice does Lucky make to help Martin?
20. What is Martin's "hidden talent"? Cite ways in which he uses this "talent" before he becomes aware of it. Would you like to have Martin's "talent"? Why or why not?
21. Why is Edgeview a particularly appropriate name for the school to which Martin is sent? List the ways in which this name might be interpreted in the context of the story.
22. What is the most important thing Martin tells the State Inspection Committee about Edgeview? How does this truth lead Martin to realize another, very painful truth? Is there a relationship between Martin's refusal to recognize his own "hidden talent" and his thoughts about his relationship with his father? Explain your answer.
23. At the end of the story, Martin comments that "the last thing I want is to be a bully." How can his "hidden talent" make him a bully? Can everyone be a bully in some way? Can all bullies stop themselves?
24. What is a talent? Are all abilities talents? Are all talents useful? Can the discovery of certain types of talent be upsetting or frightening? Do you agree with Martin that "every talent has a price"? Explain your answer.