

**A Teacher's Guide to
Zoe's Extraordinary Holiday Adventures
by Christina Minaki**

The Story

In most ways, nine year-old Zoe has it good. Her parents are kind, her brother Simon isn't half bad, her dog Ella is amazing, she loves school, and she has great friends. But Zoe thinks her life is boring. Nothing ever changes. She will always need a wheelchair, and her parents will always want to protect her -- keeping her from having any real adventures.

When Zoe learns about the diverse cultures of her friends at school, she begins thinking of her own life differently. While celebrating the varied holiday traditions of Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Divali, and Eid, things become less and less predictable and Zoe realizes that adventures can arrive in weird and wonderful ways. When Zoe finds she needs to take charge for the first time, will she succeed? Are adventures really that great? This is the story of a girl who learns about what draws us together despite differences, and discovers that she can make things happen.

The Author

Christina Minaki is a librarian, researcher, and writer who holds a Master's Degree in Information Studies from the University of Toronto. She currently writes and reviews books full-time, using her expertise in research to enrich the characters and stories she creates. Christina is committed to empowering young people and is a strong advocate for the rights of women, children, and people with disabilities. One of the main purposes of her writing is to give a voice to the need for all forms of equality. She lives in Toronto, and when she is not writing, she enjoys horseback riding, reading, traveling, and spending time with her nephew.

A note to teachers, librarians, parents, and others passing on the love of books

I truly hope you enjoy *Zoe's Extraordinary Holiday Adventures*. Writing it has been a labor of love, and I pass it on to you with much hope for what is to come, since every book takes on a life of its own once it leaves the hands which carefully crafted it.

This is Zoe's story. Zoe is a young girl beginning to learn that despite the challenges inherent in living with a physical disability, hers is a life of action, and she can do anything she wants to. Her wheelchair is a necessary and useful tool, but does not define Zoe's life. It is too easy to look at or think of the word *disability* and connect it to physical deficits, and how these relate to the things one cannot do. And while this book is honest about the frustrations Zoe faces, it is also deliberately celebratory. It takes Zoe, and — I hope — her readers, on a journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance. My wish is that readers will feel, as Zoe eventually does, how truly able they are, and that the world is open and full of possibilities for them. I hope *Zoe's Extraordinary Holiday Adventures* will, in its small way, play a part in portraying people with disabilities as real people with gifts and flaws, who experience frustrations and joys — and who just happen to have unique ways of moving through the world and getting things done. The same is true, after all, of everyone.

Every child experiences difference in some way, whether disabled, poor, new to a country, or struggling with countless other challenges. Every child can relate to the ache for freedom and adventure, to the restrictions of protective parents, to squabbles with a sibling, to yearning to grow up. Zoe's is an urban

adventure story, and in this context, can speak to any number of readers. Circumstances may vary, but a wide spectrum of emotions, and many themes – anger, frustration, relief, isolation, loneliness, forgiveness, friendship, love, belonging – are universal, and the lessons Zoe learns about herself and others can be transplanted effectively. Quite deliberately, I stayed away from describing exactly where Zoe is growing up, or her physical traits in detail. This way, it is easier for readers to see themselves in her, whoever and wherever they are.

The librarian and researcher in me co-exists well with the writer, and what has resulted in this case is a wonderful story – the “wrapping” that disguises what I hope will also be the gift of a learning tool. *Zoe’s Extraordinary Holiday Adventures* reaches for the spirit of a vibrant, independent young girl, and also for a unique window into the cultures that color and enrich her world. I have become convinced of the timeliness and utility of this story in stimulating learning and discussion. I placed Zoe in the context of many characters and issues so that this story can create an important learning opportunity about inclusion on many key levels. Zoe is the centre of the story, but it also belongs to her friends and all the people who surround her. At its heart, this is the story of a community dealing with all kinds of similarities, differences, misunderstandings, and common ground.

In this guide, you’ll find writing exercises, discussion or essay questions to get readers thinking and talking, group activities to enrich the reading process and take learning further, and art assignments and projects to stimulate creativity. Of course, these are suggestions meant as a starting point. Start here, and see where Zoe takes you.

Happy reading!

Questions, writing exercises, and activities based on each chapter

Chapter One: Halloween Queen

1. Write about an adventure you’ve had or want to have.
2. Do you think Zoe made the right decision when she chose to climb the Jensens’ stairs? Why or why not? What would you have done?
3. What would you tell the boys who were staring at Zoe?
4. Draw a picture of Zoe, Anna, Ella, Simon, Mrs. Dempsey, and Aunt Beth wearing their Halloween costumes.

Chapter Two: No Surprises

1. Have you ever thought your life was boring? What happened to change your mind?
2. Do you think your parents are overprotective? Why or why not?
3. Do you think Zoe’s life is boring? Why or why not?

Chapter Three: The Christmas Tree

1. Does your family celebrate Christmas? If yes, what are some of the Christmas traditions in your family?
2. Write about some of your Christmas memories.

3. Draw the Christmas tree in Zoe's classroom, as you imagine it.
4. Different countries around the world have different Christmas traditions. Research some of these unique traditions, and present what you find to your class.

Chapter Four: The Intruder

2. Were you expecting what happens in this chapter? Why or why not?
3. Has your pet ever been sprayed by a skunk or hurt by another animal? What happened? What did you or your family do about it?
4. Write a story about an animal, or the animals, in your neighborhood.
5. Is there a pest, like Rufus, in your neighborhood? Which animal is it, and what did your neighbors do about it?

Chapter Five: Taking Charge

1. Do you think Zoe did the right thing in this chapter? Why or why not?
2. Do you think anyone could have saved Ella? Why or why not?
3. Who do you think took charge in this chapter, Nalini, Zoe, or both? Give reasons for your answer.
4. Describe a situation where you took charge.

Chapter Six: Kwanzaa Gifts

1. Does Simon owe Zoe an apology in this chapter? Do you think Zoe needed to take any of the responsibility for what went wrong? Why or why not? In the end, did Zoe do the right thing? What about Simon? Give reasons for your answer.
2. Write about a time when you had an argument with your sibling, or with another relative or friend. What happened? What did you do about it?
3. What did you learn about Kwanzaa from this chapter?
4. Do you think Mrs. Green is a good teacher? Why?
5. If your family celebrates Kwanzaa, write about some of your Kwanzaa traditions and memories.
6. Try writing a short poem about your favorite holiday, like Zoe did when her class learned about Kwanzaa.
7. Research a bird you find interesting, and write about what you find out. Draw or trace the bird.
8. Why do you think the author used the theme of birds in the story? What other themes can you find?
9. Write a scene in the story from Simon's point of view.
10. Telling African stories and fables, and singing African songs are some of the major traditions of Kwanzaa. Research the significance, or purpose, of these stories and songs in African history, and tell your class about what you learn. Either tell your class one of the stories you find, or teach them one of the songs and sing it together.

Chapter Seven: The Hanukkah Candle

1. What did you learn from this chapter about Hanukkah? If your family celebrates Hanukkah, write about some of your Hanukkah traditions and memories.
2. Why do you think Samir is upset in this chapter?
3. Ella is an especially trained dog, called a "companion dog." There are lots of dogs like her, who help people with disabilities. Take a field trip with your family or your class, to research how dogs

- like her are trained. Or, have a trainer visit your class. What did you learn?
4. Have you ever been afraid of losing a good friend? Write about how you felt and why.
 5. Write about a person you know in another country or city, whom you miss.
 6. What do you miss about when you were younger, or about where you lived when you were younger?
 7. Draw or trace the country you were born in, and mark the city.
 8. Draw or trace a different country, where someone you know was born, and be sure to write down who it is. Mark the city where they were born.

Chapter Eight: Cheated!

1. Why do you think Lisa cheats in this chapter? What would you have done about it, if you were Zoe?
2. Have you ever cheated? Why did you do it?
3. Have you ever been cheated? How did you feel?
4. At the end of this chapter, you read that Zoe was getting “very, very angry.” What do you think will happen next?

Chapter Nine: The Eid Lanterns

1. Have you ever felt like you were no good at something? How would you want people to help you when you felt that way?
2. How did Lisa’s reaction to Zoe’s art make you feel?
3. Imagine that you could ask Lisa why she is mean to Zoe. What do you think she would say?
4. Write about a situation where someone has been mean to you, or when you were mean to someone else. What did you do about it, or what do you think you should have done?
5. What do you think of Zoe’s reaction in this chapter? Were you expecting it? Why or why not?

Chapter Ten: Samir and Adam

1. What do you think of what Samir did in this chapter? Were you expecting it? Explain your answer.
2. What do you think of how Adam treated Samir?
3. If you were Samir, would you forgive Adam?
4. What did you learn about Ramadan and Eid in this chapter?
5. If your family celebrates Ramadan and Eid, write about some of your traditions and memories.
6. Do you think it’s easier to notice how someone is different from you, or how they are the same? Why?

Chapter Eleven: The Birthday Party

1. What would you have done if you were Zoe in this chapter?
2. Why do you think Zoe felt she had to take the action she took?
3. Do you think that writing the note for the waitress was a good idea? Why or why not?
4. Write a character sketch of a minor character in the story, like Adam, Mrs. Myers, Mrs. Green, or the waitress, for example. Imagine you got to know them better. What are they like?
5. Do you think Zoe did the right thing when the waitress made her upset? Why or why not?

Chapter Twelve: The Meaning of Zoe

1. What do you think of the advice Zoe’s mom gave her? What advice would you give Zoe if you could?
2. There are some things Zoe needs help with. What are some things you need help with?
3. In the story, Zoe sometimes gets frustrated because she needs to use a wheelchair, and there are things she can’t do on her own. To help your class understand a little bit about how she must feel, try this activity, using wheelchairs borrowed from a hospital, a rehab clinic, or another facility that can lend wheelchairs. Try sitting in the wheelchair and pushing it around your classroom, your school library, your school’s washrooms, the schoolyard, the gym, and other places you can think of, without standing up when you can’t reach something. Make a list of the things you can’t reach, the places where the wheelchair doesn’t fit, and the things you aren’t able to do. What do you notice? How do you feel? How would you change things in your school to make it easier for someone in a wheelchair to manage? What did you learn?
4. Try the same activity in the neighborhood around your school, pushing the wheelchair along the sidewalks, paying attention to curbs, carefully crossing roads when you need to, and going to a park or playground. Now ask yourself the same questions as above.

Chapter Thirteen: Divali Lights

1. What did you learn about Divali from this chapter?
2. If your family celebrates Divali, write about some of your Divali traditions and memories.
3. What is the difference between the way Zoe reacts to Lisa in this chapter, compared to the way she has reacted to her before?
4. Have a “cultural show-and-tell.” Tell the class about some interesting traditions your family has in their culture. Tell about some of the unique ways your family celebrates your favorite holiday.
5. Have an “Around the World Feast Day” in your class, at your school, or in your neighborhood. Bring food to share that represents your cultural background.
6. Research a holiday that your family does not celebrate. Find out how and why that holiday is celebrated, and present what you learn to your class.
7. Nalini and Ruby took a trip to India, and Anna misses Jerusalem. Write about a trip you remember, or one you want to take. Mark the destination on a map.
8. What would you tell Lisa if you could talk to her about Zoe?

Chapter Fourteen: The Secret

1. What do you think Simon is planning to do for Zoe?
2. Do you think Simon is a good brother to Zoe? Why?
3. Do you think Zoe is a good sister to Simon? Explain your answer.
4. What do you think of Nalini’s advice to Zoe?
5. Draw a picture of Nalini, as you imagine her.
6. Draw a picture of Nalini’s art studio, as you imagine it.
7. Draw a picture of Ella, as you imagine her.
8. Draw a picture of Nalini’s painting of the river in India, with the diva lamps floating.

Chapter Fifteen: Zoe’s Amazing Adventure

1. Do you think tobogganing is fun? What makes it fun?
2. Can you think of a different adventure Zoe could have had?

3. Draw a picture of Zoe and her friends on the toboggan.
4. Why do you think Zoe didn't want to be lifted once she reached the bottom of the hill in the toboggan the first time?
5. Do you think Lisa is lonely? Which part of this chapter gives you that idea?
6. What do you think will happen next?

Chapter Sixteen: Cats and Birds

1. Do you think Nalini was right to help Lisa's family? Explain your answer.
2. Zoe looks up to Nalini. Write about an adult you admire. What are they like? Why do you admire them?
3. Write a story about your pet or a pet you know.

Chapter Seventeen: The Accident

1. Did you expect what happened in this chapter? Why? What did you expect instead?
2. There are times in the story when Zoe feels left out. Write about a time when you felt left out.
3. Do you think Zoe will get in trouble for tobogganing? Why or why not?
4. Do you like Zoe's parents? Why or why not?
5. What do you think will happen next?

Chapter Eighteen: Flora and Beau

1. Do you think anyone should help Lisa? Explain your answer. If yes, who? Why did you pick that person?
2. What do you think of Zoe's plan to catch Flora?
3. Draw a picture of Flora and Beau, and of Lisa's condo after Flora has been flying around. What does the mess look like?
4. Why do you think it was important for Zoe to catch Flora?
5. Do you think Zoe and Lisa are friends at the end of the book? Why or why not?
6. If you were Zoe, would you have forgiven Lisa? Why or why not?

Chapter Nineteen: Free as a Bird

1. Write a different ending for the story.
2. What do you think happens to the following characters after the end of the story:
 - a) Zoe
 - b) Simon
 - c) Lisa
 - d) Nalini
 - e) Anna
3. What do you think is different about Zoe at the end of the story?
4. Draw a picture of your favorite scene in the story, or your favorite character. Who is your favorite character? Why?
5. Act out your favorite scene in the story.
6. Now that you've read the story, do you think Zoe's life is boring? Did you answer this question differently when you read the second chapter? Why?
7. Write a journal entry about Zoe from the point of view of one of the following characters:

- a) Simon
- b) Anna
- c) Lisa
- d) Nalini
- e) Samir
- f) The waitress

8. What have you learned from this story that surprised you?
9. Do you like Zoe? Why or why not?
10. What makes Zoe strong?
11. Design a different cover for the book, one that shows the different elements of the story.
12. Write alternative chapter titles for the sections of the story. Make sure they reflect what happens in each chapter.
13. There are lots of recipes that represent the holidays discussed in this story, and lots of other holidays from around the world. Have an “Around the World Cooking Day” at your school, and try to make some of the recipes you find.
14. There are lots of stories and songs that represent the holidays discussed in this book, and lots of other holidays from around the world. Have an “Around the World Stories and Songs Day” at your school.