

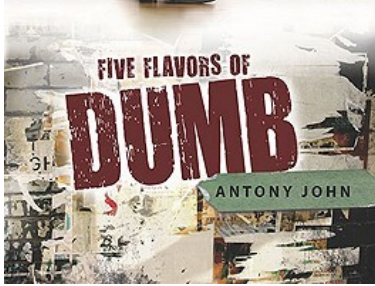


### **Five Flavors of Dumb**

Written by Anthony John

Dial Books, 2010, 338 pp.

ISBN: 978-0803734333



After winning a local Battle of the Bands competition, Dumb becomes their high school's most popular student rock band—without a manager. Piper is definitely not a rock band's first choice for manager; her extracurricular activities include chess club and she is profoundly hearing impaired. An extraordinary moment of boldness, however, pushes her to ask for the job and to promise a paying gig within a month's time in exchange for her share of the profits. Piper sees this managerial role as a way to replenish the college fund that her parents have recently spent to pay for cochlear implants for her baby sister. The novel follows this misfit band on its journey as it grows from its three

founding members— “one egomaniacal pretty boy, one silent rocker, and one angry girl”— to include “one talentless piece of eye candy and one nerd-boy drummer” (John, n.p.). With each recording session, radio interview, and live performance, the reader discovers the true depth of each character, which goes beyond their initial tag lines. Additionally, parallel attention is given to Piper's hearing family; the strain of her parents' decision to treat her sister with cochlear implants adds to the greater story. Finally, at the heart of the novel is rock and roll; John, with a strong background in music, writes the novel with a reverence for popular music— particularly the work of Jimi Hendrix and Kurt Cobain.

Books can provide students with a chance to “go beyond a tourist perspective of gaining surface-level information about another culture” (Short, Evans, & Hildebrand, 2011, p. 34). John does this by helping us understand Piper's membership in Deaf Culture. Her abilities are seen as assets: lip reading allows her access to private conversations and, as a shrewd manager, she uses sign language to obscure her intentions from a crooked promoter. Furthermore, this glimpse into her life shows the many ways Piper communicates with family members, friends, and teachers (e.g., ASL, speaking, Instant Messaging on the computer, and texting).

This novel has been honored by two major awards: the International Reading Association deemed it a Notable Book for a Global Society (NBGS) and it won the Schneider Family Book Award from ALA for the young adult category. Both of these designations reflect the high degree of cultural authenticity in the book. During his speech at the Schneider Disability Forum, John spoke of the importance of this award to writing and publishing books about people with disabilities: “It gives teens a voice who for so many years had no voice in literature. But also, just importantly it gives all readers the opportunity to read about characters that had previously not existed in children's literature” (quoted by Sullivan, 2011).

Likewise, Dr. Katherine Schneider, founder of the award, stated that the winners are “stories about people and the people with disabilities in them are not super heroes, they are just people. I think it helps kids without disabilities to understand what life is like with a disability. And the more they

understand the less they'll avoid their classmate who has a disability" (as quoted by Sullivan, 2011). To make his portrayal of Piper authentic, John shared in his acknowledgements section that he sat in on an ASL class, spoke with a professional at the St. Louis Children's Hospital Department of Audiology for a hearing aid tutorial, and even contacted the financial aid office of Gallaudet University (Piper's school of choice).

*Five Flavors of Dumb* would be appropriate for independent reading at a ninth grade level, but I could see it being well-received as a read aloud in the middle grades (6-8). Caldecott winner, Brian Selznick's (2011) new book, *Wonderstruck A Novel in Words and Pictures*, also features a protagonist who is deaf. Because of its setting in the Pacific Northwest, and its emphasis on rock, this novel could be paired with Randy Powell's (2003) *Tribute to Another Dead Rock Star* and Blake Nelson's (2004) *Rock Star Superstar*.

## References

<http://antonyjohn.net/>

Short, K., Evans, A., & Hildebrand, K. (2011, August/September). Celebrating International Books in Today's Classroom: The Notable Books for a Global Society Award. *Reading Today*, pp. 34-36.

Sullivan, K. (2011, October 27). Book Award Celebrates Awareness for Disabilities. *Inside Eau Claire*.

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