

## The Author's Study Guide – *The Real Life Channel*

### About the Author

Robert A. Black is a former writer for the TV series *You Can't Do That On Television*, which aired on Nickelodeon in the US and CTV in Canada during the 1980s and early 1990s. During the 1985 taping session, he worked on the set as the "script doctor," revising scenes when necessary and also occasionally helping out with the taping. He even appeared on camera a handful of times. In all, he wrote nine complete episodes for the series and contributed to six others. In 1991, one of his episodes was chosen for Nickelodeon's "Kids Pick'Em Friday," a day-long audience request special.

Mr. Black later moved to Southern California and attempted to start a screenwriting career in Hollywood. He eventually switched to writing books because he preferred the greater creative freedom and control it offered. *The Real Life Channel* is his second published novel.

### About the Inspiration

The first version of *The Real Life Channel* was written in 1987 as a script that could be performed either live onstage or in a three-camera TV studio. It was a completely different story from the current novel (Andrea Bligh is the only character in both versions), but just like the novel, it centered around a mysterious TV network that claimed to show real people leading normal lives, but actually manipulated its viewers and performers alike.

The current novel takes the idea of the Real Life Channel and places it in a new setting, inspired by Mr. Black's experience as a writer for *You Can't Do That On Television*. The TV show in the novel, *What Do You Think You're Doing?*, was inspired by the Nickelodeon series, and some of the characters were inspired in varying degrees to *You Can't Do That On Television* cast members and the characters they played.

### About the Story

*The Real Life Channel* is about a group of teenage actors working on a children's TV comedy called *What Do You Think You're Doing?* It doesn't have the glamour of Hollywood, but it's fun – at least until their network suspends production and threatens to cancel the show.

Some of the kids decide to solve their problem themselves by looking for a new network. One of their targets is the Real Life Channel, a network devoted to reality-based programming. The attempt succeeds beyond their expectations when a network representative offers to give them a new home on the airwaves.

Everyone is excited at first, but their mood changes when strange things begin to happen. People begin to act differently, while small TV cameras start turning up in strange places. Soon all the kids are under the spell, convinced that they are happy doing whatever the network wants them to do. But then the network's influence goes too far, and the kids decide to strike back. They ultimately succeed, and things return to normal. The kids know they're not as likely to become stars, but they'd rather have their normal lives anyway.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does being in the cast of *What Do You Think You're Doing?* mean to Alan? What does it mean to Sydney? What does it mean to Jason Chang? Which of them would you be most like?
2. Compare the way Alan reacts to the show being put on hold to the way Jason Marlow reacts. Which is more like the way you would react?
3. Why do Charlotte and Brenda want to give up making the show? Have you ever given up something you used to like doing when you were younger?
4. Alan's mother has doubts when she first reads the Real Life Channel's contract. Is she being reasonable, or is she worrying too much? (Remember that at this point in the story, nobody knows what the Real Life Channel is planning to do.)
5. Compare the way Sydney first thinks about the Real Life Channel's offer to the way her dads think when they first read the contract. How important do you think each of their points of view are? (Again, remember that at this point, nobody knows what the Real Life Channel is doing.)
6. Alan receives several warnings before he has to turn in his permission forms, but he goes to turn the forms in anyway. Would you have done the same? Why or why not?
7. The Real Life Channel's audience vote pressures the kids into seeing each other as competitors instead of as friends. Have you ever been in a similar situation? What did you do?
8. Why do you think Alan's classmates start treating him differently once Andrea tells them he's going to be a star? What would you do if you were in that class? What would you do if you were in Alan's place?
9. At what point in the story does the Real Life Channel change Alan and Sydney? How can you tell?
10. Alan has doubts about the Real Life Channel almost from the beginning, but he tries to ignore them and push them away harder than anyone else. Why? Is what he's getting from them really worth that much?
11. Why does Alan become angry when he figures out that his fans were all manipulated into liking him? Shouldn't he just be grateful for the Real Life Channel's help and enjoy the attention? Why or why not?
12. What clues might have told Alan, Jason and Sydney that breaking into the Real Life Channel's broadcast center was a trap?

13. Daniel betrays his friends to get the job of Devon's sidekick in *Real Life Renegade*. Why do you think he did that? Was it only because the Real Life Channel changed him, or was he still angry because they hadn't recognized him in the office before?
14. Marcus Bligh claims that his Scriptor machine brought out things that Alan, Sydney and the others were already feeling and thinking, even if they weren't aware of them. Should the kids believe him? What clues can you find that would prove or disprove his claim?
15. Imagine you're standing in the control room with Alan, Sydney and Jason, and Marcus Bligh gives you the same choice he gave them. What would you choose?
16. When Alan, Sydney and Jason are trying to figure out how to break the Scriptor's hold on people, Sydney feels grateful that Alan and Jason are actors, because it makes them more aware of their feelings than most boys are. Is she being sexist? Or realistic? Or both? What makes you think that way?
17. Imagine Andrea's scene in the conference room from her point of view. Do her attempts to persuade Alan, Sydney and Jason seem reasonable? Why do you think that?
18. If Marcus Bligh had been changed by the Scriptor, just like everybody else, then who – or what – do you think was really in charge of the Real Life Channel?
19. How much do you think the real Andrea is like the version of her that the Scriptor created?
20. What do you think Andrea would do if she ever remembered everything about the Real Life Channel? Should Alan tell her anything about it?

### Topics for Research and Discussion

1. Take notes as you watch one of your favorite TV shows. What things do you see that look like they could happen in real life? What things do you see that look like they could never happen in real life? Compare your lists with others in your class. Do people who are familiar with your show agree with you? Do people who aren't familiar with your show agree with you?
2. Even before Marcus Bligh started using the Scriptor on Alan, Sydney and Jason, he and Andrea were able to manipulate them into working with the Real Life Channel and doing what the Channel wanted. How did they do that? List and discuss some examples. Have you ever been manipulated into doing something in a similar way?
3. *The Real Life Channel* provides a behind-the-scenes look at the making of a TV show. In addition to the actors, you meet Owen the producer, Ruth the director, Robert the studio manager (also known as the floor director), Jennifer the makeup artist, Jana the wardrobe coordinator and Benito the stagehand. Research one of these jobs, or choose another TV studio job, and find out how it contributes to the overall production. Does it sound like a job you'd like to do?
4. Alan's fame grows under the Real Life Channel's influence, but that fame comes at a price. How does his life change as he becomes more famous? What does he lose? Do you think he would still lose those things even if he'd become famous without the Real Life Channel's influence? Make a list of some real celebrities. Do they have to give anything up because they're famous?
5. *The Real Life Channel* is a mixture of several different types of fiction. It has elements of comedy, mystery, fantasy and adventure. List some examples of each style. How do all the different styles combine to create the overall story?