



# EDUCATORS' GUIDE

*The kid was going to snap. Anyone with a set of working eyes should've been able to see that. Those children could have been nicer to that boy, maybe all this wouldn't have gone down.*

— From *Hello Herman*

## INTRODUCTION

Bullying is not a new phenomena, but bullying in schools has reached epidemic proportions. Victims of bullying often suffer emotional distress, such as anxiety and depression, putting them at an increased risk for substance abuse and suicide. According to recent statistics, harassment and bullying have been linked to 75% of school-shooting incidents. That's a huge number, and one that all educators need to be aware of as they work to address bullying in our schools.

In the play *Hello Herman*, sophomore Herman Howards goes on a school-shooting rampage, killing 39 students and 3 teachers. Over the course of the play, we learn that Herman has been the victim of incessant abuse from peers: verbal, relational, and physical bullying. While a work of fiction, the events in *Hello Herman* are all too familiar: one simply needs to recall the tragic events at Columbine High School and Virginia Tech to make a connection between the play and the ever-increasing incidents of high school shootings and gun violence.

*Hello Herman* raises important questions surrounding the bullying epidemic, including such issues as:

- student isolation
- erosion of human dignity
- lack of empathy
- blame
- parental and societal responsibility
- and the clique warfare that fosters exclusion, labelling, and the narrow social categorization of young people that can lead to bullying behavior

Currently, 49 states have passed anti-bullying legislation. Many school districts across the country are implementing anti-bullying programs into their curricula. Use *Hello Herman* and this educator's guide to assess student attitudes about bullying and to generate a dialogue and inspire written reflections on bullying issues in your school and community. Finally, consider using some of the post-reading activities to empower your students to affect positive change in the nation's efforts to put an end to bullying. Join us in this national effort to put an end to bullying.

## BEFORE READING

### Get a Copy of the *Hello Herman* Play

Go to [www.thehellohermanproject.com/play](http://www.thehellohermanproject.com/play)

### Preview of Vocabulary and References

The following words may be unfamiliar to students. Consider reviewing definitions before reading *Hello Herman*: advocate, anarchy, bastardization, conformist, culture, exclusive (as in a news exclusive), execution, facade, karma, massacre, rampant, remorse, secedes, towelhead, vengeance. (See Appendix for definitions.)

Introduce the following three books referenced in *Hello Herman*. See appendix for descriptions of each title.

*The Anarchist's Cookbook*, by William Powell (1971), *In Cold Blood*, by Truman Capote (1966), and *Mein Kampf*, by Adolph Hitler (1925-26).

### Assessing Background Knowledge

Give students an overview of what they are about to read, and in particular, that the main character was a victim of bullying at school. Begin a pre-reading discussion by asking the following questions:

- What makes a bully? Are there certain “types” of kids that become bullies or victims of bullies?
- What emotions do you think victims of bullies experience? (Possible responses might include: fear, isolation, chipping away of self-dignity, humiliation, loneliness, despair, anger, and desperation).
- Have you ever witnessed bullying? What did you do in response, if anything? Why?
- Do you think that young people have the ability to stop bullying? If so, how? If not, why?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Act One — Scene One

The play opens with Herman Howards ordering a fellow student to “oink.” Why do you think Herman chose to force Susan to “oink” and “squeal” like a pig? By making his victim like an animal, how is Herman mimicking the behavior of his own tormentors? (p. 11)

Lax states that “We’re giving them [kids] a fast-food, short-term, downsized, techno-driven world. It’s cold. And they can’t make any sense of it.” Do you agree with Lax’s comment that society contributes to bullying and “high school terrorism”? (p. 11)

On page 12, Lax says, “They might still allow you a momentary break from the constant assault of ‘Buy this, use that, feel this, and sell that.’ “ Discuss this statement. Do you agree with this description of contemporary culture? Why or why not? Who is “they?”

Lax tells viewers that “we’re going to explore what happens when you disregard human life,” referring to Herman’s massacre of 46 people. Why do you think it was seemingly so easy for Herman to commit such a horrible act of violence? How did the relentless bullying he endured contribute to his decision to murder innocent people? (p. 12)

While being interviewed, Herman’s friend Timmy claims, “Some people are just angry. That’s the way it is.” Do you agree with this idea? Do you think Herman was entitled to his anger? How could he have vented his anger in a healthy way? (p. 13)

In the same interview, the school guard says, “There’s no way someone close to that boy could not have seen this coming. I don’t know what’s wrong with his mother, but it must be something for her not to have seen the signs.” Do you think it is possible to foresee an event such as Herman planned and executed? What might have prevented Herman from going through with his attack on the school? How can you help a student who you know is being bullied? (p. 13)

The school guard continues, claiming, “The kid was going to snap. Anyone with a set of eyes should’ve been able to see that. Those children could have been nicer to that boy, maybe all this wouldn’t have gone down. What is the difference between being *nice* and being *kind*? Why does kindness matter? (p. 14)

In the interview scene with Sheyla Duvall, Gail Howards says that she made her job a “top priority.” Do you think her choices contributed in any way to Herman’s actions? Do you think it is fair to blame a parent for the acts of his/her child? Do you think Herman would have committed his crime regardless of whether his mother was more present in his life? Why do you think people rush to assign blame in the aftermath of tragic events? How is blaming an individual easier than looking at other factors that may have caused the problem? (p. 33)

Herman watched violent movies and played video games that rewarded the player for killing as many people as possible. When asked if video games have “numbed” him to violence, Herman doesn’t understand the question. Later he claims that playing violent games have made him “a good shot.” Do you think that exposure to violent media content (Internet, games, film, television, music) can desensitize a person to real-life violence? Do you think there is a direct link between violent media content and teen violence? (p. 20)

After Lax asks Herman if he had been picked on at school, Herman responds, “Every day. The jocks call me names ‘cause I’m small. They’d yank my underwear up my ass. Push me around. Shit like that.” How did the constant verbal, relational (social isolation, rumor-spreading), and physical abuse perpetrated on Herman slowly chip away at his dignity? How did being bullied cause Herman to become more and more isolated? (p. 19)

During the interview, Herman says, “...there is no way in hell those people weren’t going to get what they deserved.” In your opinion, what do bullies deserve as just consequences for their actions? What makes your suggestions just or right? (p. 26)

## Act Two – Scene One

Why does Herman refer to himself as a “superstar” ? How did the bullying he received at school feed his desire to be noticed and to videotape the massacre of his fellow students and teachers? (p. 32)

## Scene Two

In the exchange between Gail Howards and Sheyla Duvall, the issue of parental responsibility comes into question. Do you think that parental monitoring or forbidding the use of the Internet and other media might prevent kids from committing violent crimes? (p. 32-35)

During an interview session with Lax, Herman says, “When you’re a kid, you have to find the one thing you care about more than anything else and stick to it, ‘cause that’s all you got.” Why do you think Herman would hold this as his personal philosophy? Do you agree or disagree with Herman’s statement? Do you think this a common belief held by many bullied kids? (p. 36)

Herman describes the worst thing that happened to him at school is when two students corner him in the school lavatory and forced his head into the toilet. Mr. Phelps, a teacher, catches the bullies in the act, briefly lectures them, then sends them off to the principal’s office to “tell her what you’ve done.” Do you think the manner in which Mr. Phelps dealt with the bullies was effectual or ineffectual? Why? Could the situation have been handled differently? How do you think the bullies should have been

reprimanded for their behavior? How does Mr. Phelps' comment about Herman being a "nerd" promote the labeling of kids? (p. 38)

Herman is clearly a victim of verbal bullying at the hands of many students. Marsha, the school's "hottest" girl, talks to Herman. Later, a friend calls her away and refers to Herman as "Freakshow." How does verbal abuse whittle away at one's human dignity and self-worth? How does Susan and Marsha's lack of empathy contribute to Herman's eventual breakdown? On this same page, a stage direction reads: *Marsha lingers for a moment, looking helplessly at Herman*. Do you think that Marsha's response to Susan was driven by peer-pressure to conform to the values of her social group (*the popular kids*)? Explain. (p. 42)

Senator John Cox states, "There is a virus in our children. A virus more contagious than we know. This virus is a tendency towards violence as a solution to their problems." Do you agree with this idea of a virus of violence? How is bullying, left unchecked, similar to a virus? (p. 44)

Herman has a recurring nightmare that he describes to Lax: "Those assholes. They come back, and I shoot them again. They come back again. I keep shooting. It's like I have unlimited bullets and they have unlimited lives. We keep going and going, No reason. No goal. We just keep going." How is Herman's dream a metaphor for the experiences he suffered at the hands of bullies, and a preview of what he will eventually do? (p. 47)

Herman explains to Lax that "people needed a lesson." Finally, he concludes that, "Maybe they learned to be a little nice to each other." Do you think massacres that are executed by bullied kids teach society to be "nicer?" What can be done at a school level to teach kids to be kind to one another? Is it possible to teach kindness? Empathy? Whose responsibility is it to teach values to young people? (p. 48)

Herman goes on to say that his actions were "...the only way to get you to pay attention to me." Do you think that if Herman had not been incessantly bullied he would have gone to such extreme measures to make himself noticed? He continues by saying, "I wasn't about to go through life being unnoticed," and " You have to do the unspeakable if you want to be noticed." How did bullies contribute to Herman feeling *invisible*? (p. 49)

## AFTER READING

### Reflect on the Text

Pose the following questions to students and have them respond in their writing journal. (Invite students to share and/or discuss their entries, yet make it clear that should they choose not to share publicly that their responses will be read only by the teacher):

- Have you ever seen bullying, like what Herman experiences in school, or in other places? Describe the incident/s that you have witnessed.
- Have you ever been bullied like Herman? Describe the incident/s and how it made you feel.
- Have you ever bullied someone? Describe the incident(s) and how it made you feel? How do you think it made your victim feel?

### Research the Issue

49 states currently have anti-bullying laws in place to protect people from being victims of bullying. Work with students to study your state's law ([www.bullyingpolice.org](http://www.bullyingpolice.org)). Guide students to create an informational pamphlet highlighting major components of the law, as well as statistical information on bullying. Encourage students to include local, state, and national help sites for victims of bullying. Help students form a plan to disseminate the finished pamphlet throughout the school community.

### Get Active

Have students work in small groups to plan a school-wide anti-bullying campaign. Encourage students to brainstorm and discuss strategies that might stop bullying and how to represent those ideas creatively. Some students may choose to write a public service announcement, while others might work with the visual arts teachers to create posters, murals, and performance art to raise awareness about bullying. Finally, help students devise ways to promote their cause throughout the school community, such as reading public service messages over the school PA system, or holding an art exhibit. To move beyond the school, students can photograph and post visual art works to the Hello Herman Project Facebook page at [facebook.com/thehellohermanproject](https://facebook.com/thehellohermanproject), or in the Forum of the Speak Out page at [thehellohermanproject.com](http://thehellohermanproject.com).

Participate in The Hello Herman Act It Out Video Contest. First, have your class screen the video introduction by *Hello Herman* playwright John Buffalo Mailer at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HNqBKT2XG6c](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HNqBKT2XG6c). Next, visit [www.thehellohermanproject.com](http://www.thehellohermanproject.com) for additional details.

## APPENDIX

The following information will assist instruction as you prepare students to read *Hello Herman*.

### Definitions of Vocabulary Words

advocate. *verb*. to speak or write in favor of; support or urge by argument; recommend publicly.

anarchy. *noun*. a state of society without government or law; confusion or disorder.

bastardization. *noun*. the act of bastardizing. (bastardize. *verb*. to lower in condition or worth; debase).

conformist. *adjective*. of or characterized by conforming, especially in action or appearance.

culture. *noun*. the behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group.

exclusive. *noun*. a piece of news, or the reporting of a piece of news, obtained by a newspaper or other news organization, along with the privilege of using it first.

execution. *noun*. the infliction of capital punishment or, formerly, of any legal punishment.

facade. *noun*. a superficial appearance or illusion of something.

karma. *noun*. the good or bad emanations felt to be generated by someone or something.

massacre. *noun*. 1. the unnecessary, indiscriminate killing of a large number of human beings or animals, as in barbarous warfare or persecution or for revenge or plunder. 2. a general slaughter, as of persons or animals.

rampant. *adjective*. violent in action or spirit; raging; furious.

remorse. *noun*. deep and painful regret for wrongdoing; compunction.

secede. *verb*. to withdraw formally from an alliance, federation, or association, as from a political union, a religious organization, etc.

towelhead. *noun*. an offensive term for a person wearing a turban.

vengeance. *noun*. infliction of injury, harm, humiliation, or the like, on a person by another who has been harmed by that person; violent revenge.

Source: [Dictionary.com](http://Dictionary.com)

## REFERENCES

Some students may be unfamiliar with these titles, yet it is important that they have a basic understanding of each as they relate to Herman’s character and to his actions.

*The Anarchist’s Cookbook*, by William Powell. First published in 1971, this book contains instructions for the manufacture of explosives, rudimentary telecommunications phreaking devices, and other items. It was written by William Powell to protest United States involvement in the Vietnam War. (Source: [wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Anarchist's_Cookbook))

*In Cold Blood*, by Truman Capote. *In Cold Blood* [1966] tells the true story of the murder of the Clutter family in Holcomb, Kansas, in 1959. The book is written as if it were a novel, complete with dialog, and is what Truman Capote referred to as “New Journalism” — the nonfiction novel. (Source: [cliffsnotes.com](https://www.cliffsnotes.com/study-guides/truman-capote/in-cold-blood))

*Mein Kampf*, by Adolph Hitler. Combines elements of autobiography with an exposition of Hitler’s political ideology. Volume 1 of *Mein Kampf* was published in 1925 and Volume 2 in 1926. (Source: [books.google.com](https://books.google.com/books?id=8v1t3Q9308cC))

## ABOUT THE PLAY

John Buffalo Mailer wrote *Hello Herman* in response to the Columbine School Massacre. John was, and continues to be, amazed by the increasing amount of violence happening in our schools and he wanted to express his feeling and concerns using art and theater. The play has been performed in theaters across the country and has recently been made into a movie, *Hello Herman*, starring Norman Reedus and Garrett Backstrom. The play follows a normal, middle-class kid, Herman, as he is continually bullied and abused until he feels his only option is extreme violence against all of his aggressors and others who, subtly and not so subtly, allowed the bullying to continue. After he wipes out a number of people at his school, he contacts a reporter, Lax Morales, so he can tell his story on TV before he is executed for his crimes. Lax has a terrible past of his own and is haunted by Herman's story as he relives his own terrible history. We hope that the play helps provide a context for all of us to raise the dialogue around ending bullying.

To get a copy of the *Hello Herman* script, go to [thehellohermanproject.com/play](http://thehellohermanproject.com/play)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Buffalo Mailer is an actor, journalist, playwright and producer. He co-founded Back House Productions in New York City with Thomas Kail and two other Wesleyan grads in October of 2000. Within one year Back House became the resident theater company of The Drama Bookshop's Arthur Seelan Theater, and have developed several plays, including the 2008 TONY Award Winner for Best Musical, *In The Heights*. He can be seen in Oliver Stone's *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* and the upcoming Matthew Barney film *River of Fundament*. He is a member of The Dramatists Guild, Actors Equity Association, Screen Actors Guild and The Actors Studio.

To get a copy of the *Hello Herman* script, go to [thehellohermanproject.com/play](http://thehellohermanproject.com/play)

This Educators' Guide was prepared by Colleen Carroll, literacy specialist, teacher, curriculum writer-developer, education consultant, and author of the 12-volume childrens book series, *How Artists See* (Abbeville Press).

To contact Colleen, visit [colleencarrollbooks.com](http://colleencarrollbooks.com).