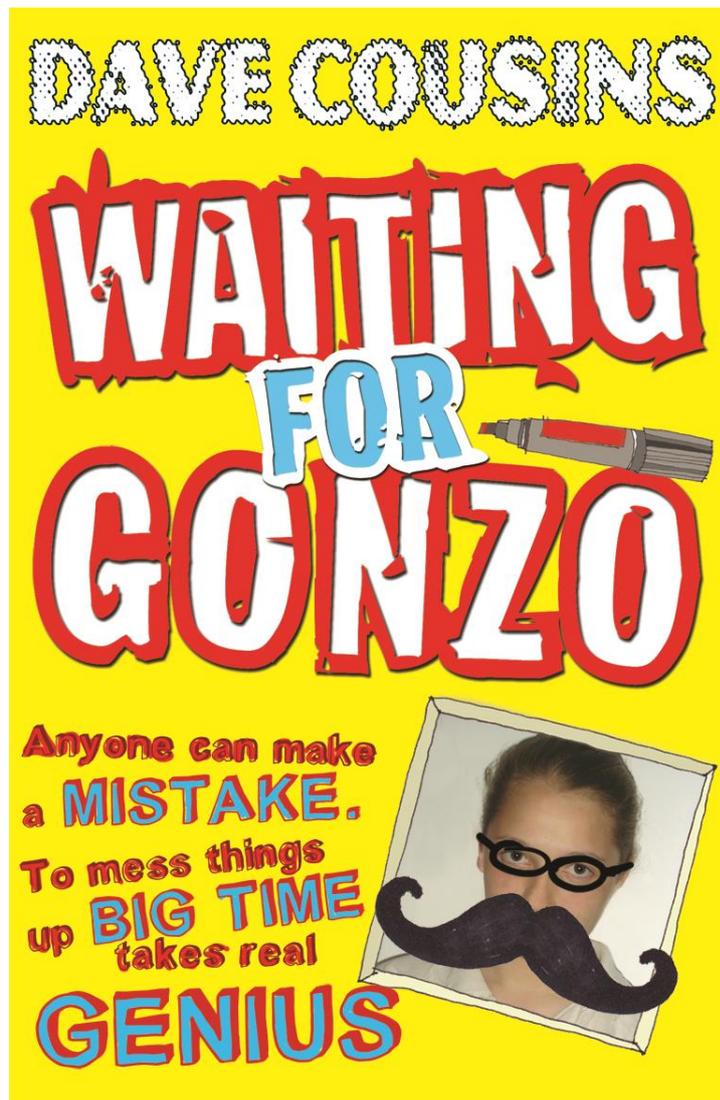
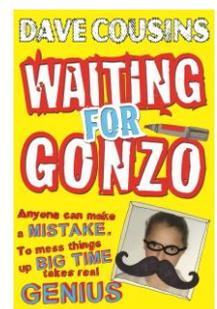


**Ideas for exploring *Waiting for Gonzo* by Dave Cousins
with pupils in Years 7-9**



Introduction

Uprooted from his friends and former life, Oz finds himself stranded in the sleepy village of Slowleigh, living in a dilapidated and remote farmhouse on a hillside with his mum, dad, and sister, Meg. On his first day at his new school he makes a rash mistake which not only attracts the attention of the school ‘psycho’, but sets in motion a chain of events which will make Oz both friends and enemies along the way. Meanwhile, his sister has a growing problem of her own . . . she’s pregnant. *Waiting for Gonzo* is rollercoaster of a read, narrated by Oz, in conversation with G (Gonzo), the growing foetus in his sister’s belly. Oz is a joker, a lovable rogue who makes everyone laugh; he takes life lightly, acts impulsively, and frequently makes some misguided decisions, but ultimately this is a comic story with a heart—about new beginnings, friendship, and family ties.

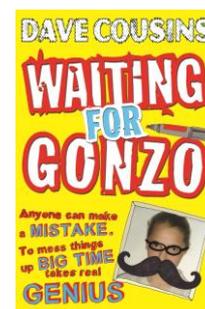


Synopsis

The story opens on Oz's first day at his new school, Crawdale High, where he is shown around by Ryan, a geeky character who will become central to the action. A lot happens quickly, making this first day one to remember. In his first lesson, the seed is sown; the teacher mentions the famous defacing of the *Mona Lisa*, an image which is instantly etched on Oz's memory. Next up, he produces some dirty laundry (his sister's bra) from his rucksack instead of a pencil case, much to the entertainment of his new classmates. The scene is now set for Oz to be ridiculed by Gareth, a dominant force in the year, who mercilessly exploits a rich vein of underwear-themed banter at Oz's expense. In defence, Oz does what he is good at: showing off and playing the fool. To an assembled audience in the corridor, he draws a moustache on a picture of a girl on the wall—who turns out to be the school 'psycho', Isobel Skinner, also one-time county champion and black belt in tae-kwon-do. Oz then finds himself in a series of dramatic scrapes which relate back this one impulsive act of graffiti. As a vengeful joke, Isobel sets her dog, 'The Beast', on him. Taking refuge in a tree, he manages to fall out into the road and cause his mum to have a minor car crash; they both end up in hospital . . .

Next, Oz discovers his sister's secret by reading a text message on her phone. They keep this from their parents, until Kris, Meg's ex-boyfriend and the father of the baby, decides to pay her a visit. The sub plot of Meg's pregnancy provides an imaginary friend for Oz, in the shape of Gonzo, or G, the developing foetus, who Oz names after a goofy character from *The Muppets*. When Kris leaves Meg to cope alone, and she decides to terminate the pregnancy, Oz realizes that everything that has happened so far has brought him to this junction in his life. For once he sees clearly, and is convinced that he must 'save' G. The happy irony is that Meg has had a change of heart at the very last minute and comes home from hospital, still with her bump.

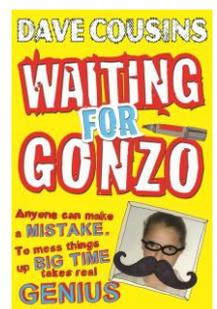
Meanwhile, Oz's friendship with Ryan develops—though they are broadly different characters with apparently little in common. Ryan is into fantasy and science fiction novels, and goes on weekends in the woods re-enacting battles, while Oz obsessively plays on *Slam Showdown*, listens to music, and misses his old friends. When photos of Ryan dressed up as a



hobbit and taken illicitly by Oz on his phone camera get posted on the internet, the boys' new friendship is tested.

The plot accelerates to a hilarious and action-packed crescendo when Meg, pregnant, rebellious, and full of anger, decides to rob the pub where she works as she hates the landlord for his misogynist and bullying ways. Oz becomes an accomplice to the crazy plan, which coincides with the weekend when he goes with Ryan to Fight Camp. Oz thinks he has lined himself up with the perfect alibi, but, predictably for Oz, everything goes wrong. The pub is raided by a real gang of burglars, and, after some page-turning thrills and spills in the middle of the night, Ryan saves the day.

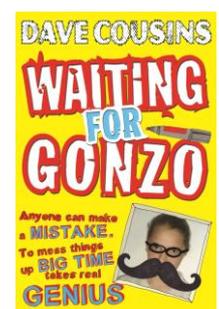
When the baby comes, it is in fact a girl who they call Gina—another G. Oz has worked through the chain of events which he set in motion on Day One. Forty weeks have passed and the wait for Gonzo is over. Oz has lost a friend, G, but he has a baby niece and has made some friends out of the enemies he initially thought he had. He has learnt a lot about himself too.



Fitting in

Oz has moved to a place he considers to be ‘Nowheresville’ and is forced to adjust to very different surroundings, a new school, and to make new friends. The village of Slowleigh is a culture shock to Oz, who is from a Southern city—he finds people’s accents are different, no one is into the same music as him, he misses his friends . . . and it’s always raining.

- ‘*First impressions last*’, says Mum, as she drops Oz off for his first day at school. Although the book goes on to show that first impressions are often inaccurate, are they still important?
- Can you identify with Oz and his actions on his first day at school?
- How do you think you would have behaved on your first day at Crawdale High?
- How would you react to a new pupil, like Oz, starting out at your school?
- How important is it to feel that you fit in, and conform to a particular group, clique or social scene? Do you think it is more important for young people to feel accepted and to fit in?



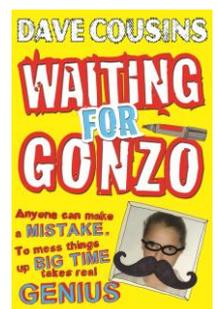
Friendships

This is a book about making new friendships. Oz misses his old crowd from home, and texts Jack and the others often, usually without much response. Meanwhile, over time, seemingly unlikely friendships with Ryan and Isobel Skinner develop.

- What does this show us about making swift judgments about people?
- Do you think Oz ultimately feels bad about the way he treats Ryan, and does he learn kindness and humility from Ryan’s long-suffering loyalty?
- In many ways, Ryan is the most likeable character in the novel. Would you agree with this? What qualities does he have which make him so likeable?
- ‘HERO SCHOOLBOY FOILS ROBBERY’—Ryan gets the glory for sounding the alarm during the robbery of the pub. Do you feel happy for him, and why?
- There are lots of different characters in the novel, many of them with very strong personalities and traits—the Eco Warrior (Meg), the School ‘Psycho’ (Isobel), the Nerd (Ryan), the Joker (Oz), the Cowardly Boyfriend (Kris). Do you think these are stereotypes moulded by Oz’s own perceptions of them, or do you recognize such characters from people you know in real life? Is it good to have such a variety of personalities around us?
- Meg and Oz fight like any siblings, but they care about each other too. Do you think that this is the case in most families?

Activity:

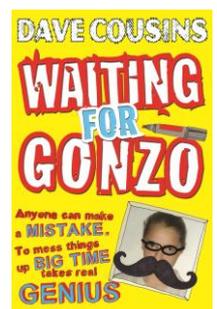
Some of the best ‘banter’ in the book is between Meg and Oz. Find a passage of their dialogue, take parts, and read it out loud.



Oz and his Wheel of Destiny

Oz says, ‘Looking back now, I can see how everything that day was leading up to the moustache, pushing me towards it like arrows painted on the ground. I was just a spoke in the Wheel of Destiny as it rolled towards its inevitable conclusion. What I’m saying . . . is that it wasn’t entirely my fault.’

- Do you think Oz is responsible for all his mistakes, or do you think that circumstance, character, coincidence, and luck—or destiny—have parts to play?
- Do you believe in destiny? Do you see yourself as ‘a spoke in the Wheel of Destiny’ as Oz does? Could you argue that Oz talks about destiny so that he doesn’t have to confront the truth about himself?
- Chapter 39 is entitled, ‘TIME TO MAN-UP AND ACCEPT THE CONSEQUENCES’. How relevant do you think this is for Oz? Do you think he grows up, and becomes wiser as the novel unfolds?
- Oz manages to be likeable and very entertaining to us as readers, though his character is flawed in some ways. Which aspects of his personality appeal to you most, and which are you most critical of?



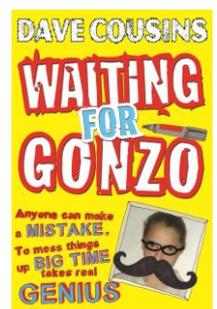
The English Lesson

In English Oz's class are set the task of writing a letter to someone they have wronged. Oz should really write his letter to Ryan, as he has behaved very badly towards him. But instead he starts writing to G. There is no doubt that Oz feels guilty, and this sense of guilt results in action, not in the form of an apology to Ryan but in an urgent impulse to save G.

- If you feel guilty about something you have done, what do you do about it?
- Is it hard to say sorry?

Activity:

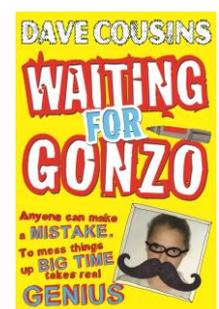
Think about what you would write if you were set a similar assignment in English. Who would you write your letter to?



Foam Shrimp Alien

Oz narrates the story through his imagined conversations with Gonzo, or G, the foetus in his sister's belly. As the chapters unfold, so G grows and develops, and in parallel, Oz does too.

- What is the significance of the book having forty chapters, and do you think it works as a way of structuring the novel?
- Why do you think Oz begins to talk to an imaginary friend? How does he feel about G?
- Chapter 21 is entitled 'THE MOMENT I REALIZED WHAT AN IDIOT I'D BEEN' and it can be seen as a pivotal moment in the book. This is mid-pregnancy for Meg, and the point at which she decides to keep the baby and not go through with a termination. In what ways is it also a turning point for Oz?
- '*Without Gonzo everything would be different.*' When G is born and becomes Gina, a healthy baby girl, Gonzo's story is over. How do you feel? Do you think the ending is a good one?



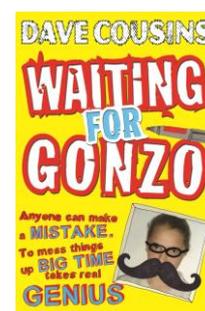
Music, gaming, and gadgets

'LIKE THE SONG SAYS . . .' is the heading for Chapter 5. Oz lives for his music, and his view of the world is usually filtered through the lyrics of his favourite band, Dead Frank's Supersonic Milkfloat. He is devastated to lose his phone at the Hallowe'en party because it holds all his best music and he has no back-up.

- How important is music to you?
- Oz tries to gain Ryan's forgiveness through music. He is appalled by Ryan's outdated taste in music (The Beatles) so plans a peace-offering, to re-educate him with playlists of his own favourite cool and off-beat bands. Do you think that it matters if you have different musical tastes to your friends?
- In turn, Ryan tries to interest Oz in his world of fantasy and sci-fi battle re-enactments by encouraging him to read *Traveller at the Gates of Time* (which Oz nicknames *The Life-Sucking Brick of Nonsense*). How far do you feel that the author is gently sending up aspects of popular youth culture, and is making fun of all of us for taking these things too seriously?
- Mobile phones are useful devices for propelling the plot forward: Oz discovers Meg's news by reading a text on her phone, Oz's phone records the incriminating photos of Ryan dressed up as a hobbit, there are chapter headings in text-speak ('OMG') and text-style conversations between Oz and G. Do you feel that texting, music, and computer games are as central in your lives as they are shown to be to characters in the book?

Activity:

Take some time out to check out the *Waiting for Gonzo* soundtrack: www.davecousins.net



The Laughs

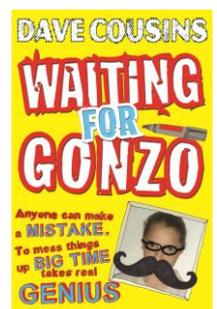
'You were right' says Ryan, 'Moustaches are funny.'

Waiting for Gonzo tackles some underlying serious issues—teen pregnancy, bullying—and explores themes of friendship and family. But overall the touch is light. There are some hilarious moments; twists and turns in the plot and sections of dialogue which are pure comedy.

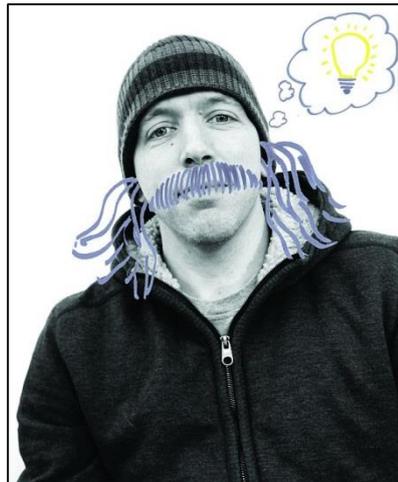
- Discuss your favourite funny moments.
- Is Oz a comedian, or an ordinary boy who makes some misguided decisions with funny consequences?
- Have you ever played a prank or a joke which has backfired?

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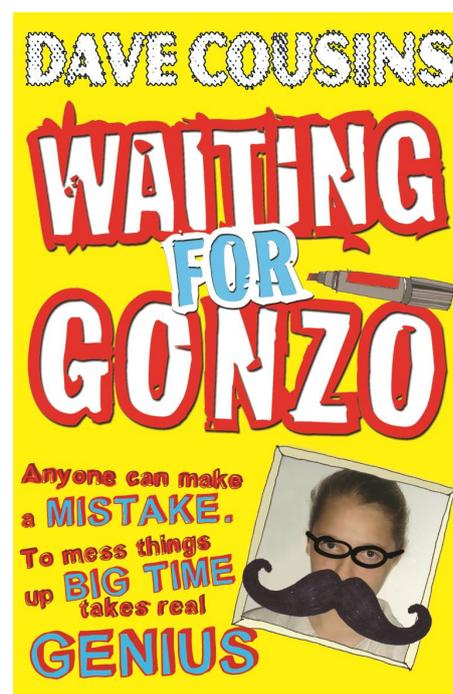
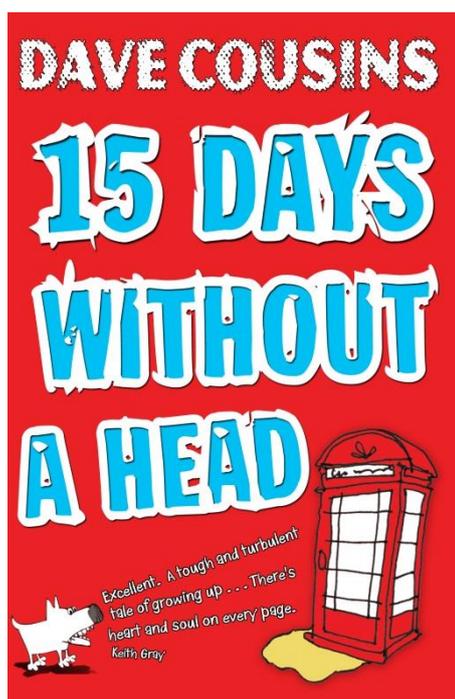
Liberate yourself! Draw a moustache on a picture from a magazine, newspaper, or a photo—or a reproduction of a famous work of art. Enjoy the moment! . . . Could your story begin here?



About the author



Dave Cousins grew up in Birmingham, in a house full of books and records. Abandoning childhood plans to be an astronaut, Dave went to art college in Bradford, joined a band and moved to London. He spent the next ten years touring and recording, and was nearly famous. Dave's writing career began aged ten with an attempt to create a script for the comedy series, *Fawlty Towers*. He has been writing songs, poems, and stories ever since. He now lives in Hertfordshire with his wife and family. Dave's writing mixes humour with more serious material, and his debut novel for teenagers, *15 Days Without a Head*, was a Sunday Times Children's Book of the Week.



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