



The Last Book in the Universe

by Rodman Philbrick

Teacher's Guide

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Synopsis

Chapter 1

The story is set in a postapocalyptic future where no one reads. Rather, they “probe it,” which involves inserting a probe in your brain to experience videos. Spaz, the narrator, can’t probe (because he has epilepsy.) Spaz uses the jargon of his time and place to tell his story. Only genetically improved people (“provs”) can get into the paradise called Eden. The rest of the people, the “normals,” live in the Urb, a polluted world of deprivation, concrete, violence, and smog, their lives controlled by gangs. Ryter is the “gummy” (old person) who changes Spaz’s life. Spaz meets Ryter when the Bangers (a gang) send him to rob the elderly man.

Chapter 2

In the backtimes, before the Big Shake, all people had ample clean water, blue skies, and grass. This is not the case now. Ryter lives in a little concrete shed in a squatters’ community by the Pipe. Spaz has lived with the Bangers, a gang, since he lost his family unit. He makes his living stealing. Knowing he was going to get robbed, the sympathetic and courteous Ryter has stacked his few meager possessions by the door. This unnerves Spaz. He notices that Ryter has kept back one thing: a book.

Chapter 3

Like Ryter, Spaz is among the few who has a long-term memory because he does not use the probes. Ryter is writing a book for the future. Spaz is amazed because no one thinks of the future, only the present. Before he leaves, Ryter makes Spaz take his possessions so Spaz won’t be harmed by the gangs.

Chapter 4

The provs control the world. Spaz is shocked when a gorgeous female prov around his age (fifteen) appears

in the Urb and wants to talk to him. She asks his name and gets her assistant to give him food. He aches to be like the perfect provs. He returns to his cube and watches an old 3D hologram.

Chapter 5

The Bully Bangers break into his cube to inspect what he took from Ryter. Spaz is terrified when he lies to Billy about the book by withholding its existence from him.

Chapter 6

Spaz goes back to the stacks, determined to steal Ryter’s book and give it to Billy. Once there, however, Spaz decides not to steal the book and tells Ryter about his earliest memories. They are about his family: his sister Bean and his parents Kay and Charly. Spaz was a foundling and Bean was his adoptive sister. Charly threw Spaz out when his epilepsy became apparent. Ryter tells Spaz that his disease is really a blessing because it prevents him from using probes and destroying his brain. Spaz runs off in a fury.

Chapter 7

Back in his cube, Spaz is met by a runner. The message is ominous:

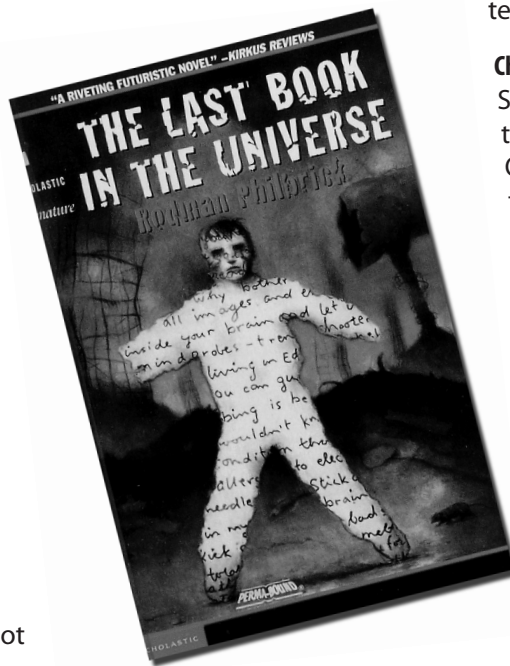
Spaz’s sister lies close to death and wishes to see him. Bean is only twelve years old. Spaz asks Billy to help him secure safe passage but Billy refuses.

Chapter 8

In a flashback, Spaz remembers staying with Bean day and night when she was ill with a bone marrow illness. When she recovered, Spaz had a seizure, which convinced Charly that he was dangerous. Spaz decides to sneak along the Edge to get to Bean. Surrounded by an angry mob that wants to avenge his thefts, Spaz has a seizure. Spaz wakes up in Ryter’s stackbox, where Ryter is soothing him. Ryter insists on coming with him on the dangerous journey across the three latches.

Chapter 9

Ryter suggests they travel via the Pipe. They trek through the old water supply system.



Chapter 10

Ryter and Spaz realize someone is following them and they brace for an attack. It turns out to be the small boy whom Spaz had bribed with some chocolate. They call him Little Face. He has only one word: "chox," which stands for "chocolate" but he uses to express all his wants and needs. After they leave the pipes, Spaz is amazed to see the remains of the skyscrapers, which he calls scrapers. After they hike a while, they are surrounded by Monkey Boys, vicious hoodlums with their faces painted to resemble monkeys.

Chapter 11

Ryter is heartened to see that the Monkey Boys have prisoners, because that means they will not be killed at once. The tek boss takes them to his leader, Mongo the Magnificent, who turns out to be a hologram. Ryter convinces the tek boss to take them to the real Mongo, the boss man of the Monkey Boys.

Chapter 12

Mongo is a filthy wretch soaked in his own waste, a result of having been plugged into a probe for more than a year. He is "looping," watching the same trendie over and over. Ryter convinces the tek boss to become the new boss. Ryter names him the "Great Gorm" and convinces him to free them and the rest of the prisoners.

Chapter 13

They resume their journey, Ryter educating Spaz about the poetry of Robert Frost, the legend of Odysseus, and the importance of writing down history so people can read it in the future.

Chapter 14

They reach the end of the pipe and the world is on fire. They see the proof girl being attacked by an angry mob as she tries to distribute food. Ryter provides a distraction so Spaz can rescue her. Ryter is very brave and Spaz finds himself growing fond of him. The proof girl, Lanaya, explains that they are in the Forbidden Zone. It is heavily mined. In gratitude for rescuing her, Lanaya vows to take them to Bean.

Chapter 15

They encounter Lotti Getts, the fierce boss of the latch.

Chapter 16

Also known as Nails and the White Widow, Lotti Getts vows to save their lives only if they find the probe runner. Otherwise, she will kill them.

Chapter 17

Lanaya takes them to Traderville to try to track down the probe seller.

Chapter 18

The Furies attack, stopping only when Lanaya says they bring offerings to Vida Bleek. Vida is the powerful boss of the underworld traders. Lanaya is disbelieving when Bleek reveals that the probe runner comes from Lanaya's home in Eden. Their conversation comes to an abrupt halt when a battle erupts.

Chapter 19

The truth emerges: The Latch Queen Lotti was just using them to distract Vida Bleek and his assassins while she attacks. They were caught in the middle of a power struggle.

Chapter 20

They finally arrive at Spaz's former home. Bean is overjoyed to see Spaz but she is very weak, dying of leukemia.

Chapter 21

Bean falls into a coma and Lanaya agrees to take her to Eden to try to find a cure.

Chapter 22

Charly reluctantly consents; Lotti allows them to leave.

Chapter 23

Spaz and Ryter are amazed at Eden: the blue sky, the green grass, the clear air. It looks as our Earth does now. They have never seen anything so beautiful. When they see that Lanaya lives in a castle, they realize that she is a princess.

Chapter 24

The visitors meet Jin and Bree, Lanaya's "contributors" (parents) and learn that she has been genetically engineered to be one of the Masters who make all the decisions for the proof world. Ryter breaks down in tears when Lanaya shows him a video of the Grand Canyon. Since no one in Eden gets leukemia any more, they do not have a cure for it.

Chapter 25

People like Lanaya have been designed to make sure that the future is planned. One of the reasons for the Big Shake and resulting disaster is that no one back then planned for the future. Ryter tells Jin that the probes are made in Eden, part of a plan, he believes, to make the

humans in the latches revert to animals. This will make them easier to exterminate.

Chapter 26

Bean is cured when she is injected with improved genes. Ryter tells Spaz that he is the hero for setting off on the quest, but Spaz feels that Ryter is the real hero.

Chapter 27

Jin is shocked when little Bean beats him at chess; after all, how can a “normal” be smarter than a proof? Bree decides to adopt Little Face, to Jin’s horror. The matter is settled when Little Face starts to talk. His first words are “I love Bree and Bree loves me.”

Chapter 28

Spaz and Ryter are summoned by the Masters.

Chapter 29

Spaz and Ryter are put on trial because they are in violation of the rule forbidding normals in Eden. Lanaya makes an impassioned plea on their behalf, but she fails and the “normals” are told they must leave.

Chapter 30

Little Face stays on Eden, but Spaz and Ryter are forced to return to the Urbs.

Chapter 31

Spaz and Bean are separated. Billy Bizmo reveals that he is Spaz’s birth father.

Chapter 32

Ryter is brutally murdered, a scapegoat because the proofs have deactivated the probes. After Ryter’s murder, Spaz has a seizure.

Chapter 33

Spaz takes up Ryter’s quest and his name.

Timeline of Modern Events Impacting Science Fiction

1970 liquid crystal watches go on the market

1971 CAT scan

1972 pocket calculator

1973 car airbags

1974 barcodes on supermarket products

1975 home computers

1976 VHS and Betamax

1977 first complete genetic structure of an organism discovered by scientists in Great Britain)
first flight of the Space Shuttle
first commercial flight of supersonic *Concorde* between New York, Paris and London
USA admits testing neutron bomb
Trans-Alaska Pipeline starts oil flowing Prudhoe Bay to Valdez

1978 Louise Brown born (first in vitro fertilization)

1979 graphical user interface developed

1980 Sony Walkman

1981 compact disks hit the market

1982 video keyhole surgery

1983 synthetic human insulin approved for sale

1984 DNA fingerprinting

1985 first dotcom registered

1986 laptop computer

1987 Prozac, an anti-depressant, hits the market

1988 first Internet virus; 10% of online computers disabled

1989 toaster becomes first appliance controlled over the Internet

1990 first gene therapy (4-year-old girl with an immune disorder)

1991 Internet browser developed (spawns World Wide Web)

1992 text messaging

1993 Global Positioning Satellite

1994 genetically modified tomatoes

1995 *Toy Story*, the first entirely computer-generated feature film

1996 Deep Field photographs of universe at 10,000,000,000 BC

1997 Dolly the sheep: first mammal cloned from an adult cell

1998 first segment of the International Space Station launched

1999 electronic reusable paper invented

2001 implanted microchips give sight to three blind men

2002 iris (eye) scanners first used for airport security

Author Sketch

Rodman Philbrick was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1951. When he was twelve years old, Philbrick started writing fiction on his own. He focused on creating short stories in the tradition of O. Henry and Ray Bradbury. Since he hadn't yet learned to keyboard, the young writer sent his pages to a typing service. He then submitted the completed stories to magazines, including *Amazing Stories*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *The New Yorker*. Not a one was ever accepted.



By age sixteen, Philbrick had decided to become a professional writer, despite his stack of rejection letters. After graduating from Portsmouth High School, he enrolled in the University of New Hampshire as an English major. He left college in his sophomore year and opened a pub he called The Stone Church. Despite this full-time business venture, he kept on writing.

Eleven years later, Philbrick had produced nine novels, all unpublished. Tired of working odd jobs to support himself-- including longshoreman, carpenter, boat-builder, and mold maker -- he decided to try his hand at a suspense novel rather than a literary one. He had found his niche. Philbrick became so successful that in 1993 he won the coveted Shamus Award, presented by the Private Eye Writers of America, for the best paperback detective novel. Besides critical recognition, financially he was able to support himself through his writing.

The publication of *Freak the Mighty* in 1993 catapulted Philbrick to even wider fame. *Freak the Mighty*, a story about two boys with disabilities who become friends the summer before eighth grade, was named an ALA Best Book for Young Adults and an ALA Quick Pick for Reluctant Young Adult Readers. It was also made into a movie called *The Mighty* (1998). Philbrick published a sequel to *Freak the Mighty*, *Max the Mighty*, in 1998. Philbrick often collaborates with his wife Lynn Harnett, also a professional writer. Their best known series are *The House on Cherry Street*, *The Werewolf Chronicles*, and *The Visitors*. Philbrick and his wife spend the winters in the Florida Keys and the rest of their time in Maine.

Critic's Corner

Reviews were generally very positive for *The Last Book in the Universe*. *Publishers Weekly*, for example, noted: "Philbrick's latest misfit protagonist embarks on an adventure in a fantastic and often frightening alternative world. The creation of a futuristic dialect, combined with striking descriptions of a postmodern civilization, will convincingly transport readers." Louise L. Sherman, writing in *School Library Journal*, said, "*The Last Book in the Universe* is a good story to use with middle schoolers ... Public libraries will find it popular among science fiction fans as well as those wanting a good adventure story.

Debbie Carton, reviewing the novel for *Booklist*, said, "There is much to admire in Philbrick's tale of a postapocalyptic future. ... there's stubborn hope and strength of conviction in the book's moving conclusion, and Philbrick has created some memorable characters in this fast-paced adventure, which will leave readers musing over humanity's future."

Other Works by the Author

Shooting Star (1982)
Slow Dancer (1984)
Shadow Kills (1985)
Ice for the Eskimo (1986)
The Neon Flamingo (1987)
The Crystal Blue Persuasion (1988)
Paint It Black (1989)
Tough Enough (1989)
Pulse (1990)
The Big Chip (1990)
Walk on the Water (1991)
The Seventh Sleeper (1991)
Hunger (1992)
Brothers and Sinners (1993)
Freak the Mighty (1993)
The Final Nightmare: Book III (1995)
The Haunting: Book I (1995)
The Horror: Book II (1995)
Nine Levels Down (1995)
The Fire Pony (1996)
Children of the Wolf (1996)
Night Creature (1996)
The Wering (1996)
Brain Stealers (1997)
Strange Invaders (1997)
Things (1997)

Abduction, with Lynn Harnett (1998)
Max the Mighty (1998)
The Fire Pony (1999)
Dark Matter (2000)
The Journal of Douglas Allen Deeds: The Donner Party Expedition 1846
(2001)
Rem World (2002)
My Name Is America (2003)
Coffins (2004)
The Young Man and the Sea (2005)

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Robinson, J. Dennis. "Rod Philbrick: Portrait of a Writer."
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www.seacoastnh.com/artists/philbrick/index.html
Routhier, Ray. "Inner Kid Carries *Freak the Mighty*." Maine
Books Online.
www.portland.com/books/about/freak.htm
"Tale of a Small Boy Makes It to Big Screen." Maine
Books Online,
www.portland.com/books/about/mighty.htm

General Objectives

1. To analyze life in the author's imaginary future world
2. To understand the allure and effects of mind probes
3. To assess each character's personality
4. To trace the sequence of events
5. To understand genetic engineering
6. To find examples of cruelty
7. To find examples of compassion
8. To evaluate the novel's ending
9. To recognize the significance of setting
10. To describe the author's theme or message

Specific Objectives

1. To analyze why Spaz has been thrown out his home
2. To understand why Spaz is one of the few people who can think and remember
3. To explore the relationship between Spaz and Bean
4. To probe how Ryter functions as Spaz's surrogate parent
5. To describe the postapocalyptic setting
6. To explore the difference between life in Eden and life in the Urb
7. To compare and contrast "normals" and "proofs"
8. To analyze what Ryter and his book symbolize
9. To understand why Lanaya fights to keep Spaz and Ryter in Eden
10. To explore why the mob kills Ryter

Literary Terms and Applications

For a better understanding of Rodman Philbrick's style, present the following terms and applications to the novel:

Allusion: a reference to a well-known place, event, person, work of art, or other work of literature. Allusions enrich a story or poem by suggesting powerful and exciting comparisons. *The Last Book in the Universe* is rich in literary allusions. For example, on page 126, Bleek says: "If you cut a proof, does she not bleed?" This is an allusion to Shylock in Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*. It suggests that proofs have feelings like normals, even though it may not seem apparent. On page 213, Ryter says, "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." This is an allusion to a poem by William Butler Yeats. It suggests the world depicted in the novel is doomed to fail because it is unstable. On page 214, Ryter says, "Nothing to fear but fear itself." He does not know the source of this quote—nor quote it correctly. It comes from a speech that President Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered during World War II. This allusion suggests that Spaz will be victorious, which indeed he will.

Science Fiction: fantasy writing that tells about make-believe events that include science or technology. Often, science fiction is set in the future, on distant planets, or among alien races. *The Last Book in the Universe* is set in the distant near future, after a giant earthquake has destroyed large parts of the world.

Dialect: the way people speak in a certain region or area. In a dialect, certain words are spelled and pronounced differently. Writers use dialects to describe their characters and setting more fully. Philbrick uses dialect extensively to evoke his future world. For example, a chetty blade is a machete knife; cancellation is death.

The Importance of Setting

The setting of *The Last Book in the Universe* is the Earth in the distant future. Huge swaths of the world have been destroyed in cataclysmic earthquakes, which released dangerous radiation. The disadvantaged descendants of the survivors (called “normals”) live in this ravaged land. Different subdivisions, called “latches,” are controlled by vicious gangs. People live in squalid concrete rooms that had been used for storage in the past. The air is polluted by acid rain and smog; the grass has all died, replaced by concrete. Many people escape their bleak life by using mindprobes, a virtual reality experience accessed through an electrode needle. The privileged people, in contrast, live in a magnificent world called Eden. They are genetically engineered to be beautiful, brilliant, and successful. The Forbidden Zone, an area booby-trapped with land mines, separates the Urb from Eden. The normals are forbidden to enter Eden, much less settle there. The setting is crucial to the novel’s theme, because the normals have no hope for the future. Ryter alone has hope, symbolized by his book. That he wants to leave a record for the future shows that he believes there will be a future. Spaz assumes Ryter’s name and quest when the old man is brutally murdered.

Cross-Curricular Sources

Novels

M.T. Anderson, *Feed*
Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*
Nancy Farmer, *The House of the Scorpion*
Ann Halam, *Taylor Five*
Marilyn Kaye, *Like Father, Like Son*
Charlotte Kerner, *Blueprint*
Steven Layne, *This Side of Paradise*
Kathryn Lasky, *Star Split*
Lois Lowry, *The Giver*
George Orwell, *1984*
L.J. Singleton, *Regeneration: The Search*
Gloria Skurzynski, *The Clones: The Virtual War Chronologs*

DVDs and Videos

The Alien Series
Blade Runner
Biotechnology on Earth
League of Extraordinary Gentlemen
The Matrix Series
The Mighty
Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow
War of the Worlds
Waterworld

Audio

The Last Book in the Universe (Listening Library)

Internet

Rodman Philbrick’s official website
www.rodmanphilbrick.com/
Write a book review with Rodman Philbrick
teacher.scholastic.com/writeit/bookrev/
Rodman Philbrick bibliography
www.fantasticfiction.com.uk/authors/Rodman_Philbrick.htm>
A Mighty Interview with Rodman Philbrick
www.seacoasthh.com/film.mighty.html
Biographical information about Philbrick
greenwood.scbbs.com/servlet
Finding a Voice
scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/spring96/philbrick.html>

Themes and Motifs

A study of the central issues and situations in Rodman Philbrick’s *The Last Book in the Universe* should include these aspects:

Themes

- violence
- genetic engineering
- coping skills
- courage
- gangs
- kindness
- epilepsy
- earthquakes
- prejudice

Motifs

- showing courage under horrific conditions
- learning about genetic engineering
- being accepted for who you are
- acting as a parental figure to a child in need
- analyzing the possible results of a mass catastrophe
- being rejected by your family
- setting off on a quest and following it through to the end
- understanding the importance of writing and reading
- assuming the mantle of leadership
- dealing with gangs, violence, hatred, and murder

Meaning Study

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have particular meaning in the book. Explain the meaning of each. Chapter and page numbers are provided to help you find the passage easily.

1. "Nothing of value," he says, pretending to yawn. "Just a book, is all." (Chap. 2, p. 16)
(Under orders from the gang that controls his area, Spaz steals all the valuable from the elderly man named Ryter. The old man hides a pile of papers. Spaz is clever and realizes that Ryter's feigned indifference reveals that the papers are very valuable. Indeed they are, for the papers represent the only record of the present. Thus, they have incalculable value to the future residents of this blighted world. This scene introduces the theme of the importance of writing and reading.)
2. "Your sister lies close to death," the runner tells me. "She wishes to see you one last time." (Chap. 7, p. 40)
(Spaz loves his younger sister Bean more than anyone else in the world. They are not related by blood. When he discovers that she is dying, he risks his life to see her and perhaps even help her. This heroic quest sets the plot into motion.)
3. "We have miles to go before we sleep." (Chap. 13, p. 88)
(Ryter quotes Robert Frost's poem "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening." On the surface, the poem describes a traveler who pauses to admire the woods. On a deeper level, the speaker is contemplating suicide because of his private despair. Ryter suggests not only that he and Spaz have "promises to keep," but also that the quest to reach Bean gives them a purpose for living and thus staves off despair.)
4. I'm glad, too, but I can't think of how to say it, so I reach over and squeeze his wrinkled hand. (Chap. 14, p. 99)
(Initially, Spaz saw Ryter as an old man fit only to be robbed. As Spaz gets to know Ryter, however, he discovers the man's compassion, wisdom, and heroism. Spaz grows to love him as a surrogate father.)
5. "That's my point, silly. Because you're not a nobody." (Chap. 19, p. 136)
(Ryter realizes that Billy Bizmo, the merciless mob boss, has not killed Spaz for a very specific reason. He is correct. Later we discover that Spaz is Billy's son.)
6. "The backtimers had a legend about it," he tells me. "Eden was a paradise." (Chap. 23, p. 159)
(In the novel, Eden is indeed a paradise, a land of blue skies, clear streams, and green grass. It is Earth in the present day, which suggests that Philbrick wants us to appreciate the majesty of our world and take steps now to preserve it for future generations.)
7. But I know who the real hero is, and it isn't me or even the brave Lanaya. It's an old man with a white beard and a walking stick and a heart so big it won't let him stop thinking he can change the world by writing things down in a book that no one will ever read. (Chap. 26, p. 181)
(Here, Philbrick presents the heroism of all writers who soldier on despite the fact that they are never likely to get published. And if they do get published, few people will ever read their books.)
8. They risked everything simply to go on living! (Chap. 29, p. 206)
(Lanaya makes her impassioned plea to allow Ryter and Spaz to stay in Eden. She is entirely correct about their intelligence and bravery, but the proovs refuse her plea nonetheless. They regard all normals as vastly inferior.)
9. Billy shakes his head if he can't believe I'm so stupid. "Because you're my son," he says. (Chap. 31, p. 217)
(Billy placed Spaz in a family so he could have a better life. Billy has protected him as much as he can. Billy is an admirable character despite his brutality, doing the best he can to nurture and protect his son in a world of incredible violence and misery.)

10. Ryter looks back at me and smiles. "The pages don't matter," he says. "You're the book now!" (Chap. 32, p. 219)
(Spaz has become the book. In the tradition of storytellers from Homer to James Joyce, Spaz is the collective unconscious of his people.)

Comprehension Study

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages in the book.

Questions 1-5 (Literal Level)

1. When and where does the story take place?
(The story is set in the future after a huge earthquake has decimated the Earth. Part of the story takes place in the Urb, a bleak world of misery. The rest is set in Eden, a gorgeous world populated by genetically-engineered people.)
2. How was the world destroyed?
(In the "Big Shake," an earthquake.)
3. What medical condition does Spaz have? How does it affect him?
(He has epilepsy, which causes him to have grand mal seizures.)
4. How does Ryter die?
(He is torn apart by a mob.)
5. What happens to Little Face at the end of the novel?
(Jin and Bree illegally keep him in Eden and raise him as their own son.)

Questions 6-8 (Interpretative Level)

6. How does Ryter function as Spaz's surrogate parent?
(Ryter nurtures Spaz, protects him, guides him, and teaches him. He also shows great fondness for the teenager and treats him with kindness and compassion.)
7. What is the symbolism in the following names: Spaz, Ryter, and Bean?
(Spaz shakes when he has his seizures, so his name is cruelly descriptive. Ryter is a "writer," so his name describes his identity. Bean is the hope for the future because she is so intelligent and kind. Like a bean, she will take root and grow, now that she has been cured of leukemia.)
8. Why do you think the author chose this topic and wrote this book?
(The author might be trying to warn readers of the dangers of not planning for Earth's future. He wants us to protect our air, water, and land.)

Questions 9 and 10 (Critical Level)

9. What does the title mean?
(The title refers to a book that Ryter creates and Spaz finishes. It refers to having hope for the future, even when the future seems unbearably bleak.)
10. Do you think the scenario described in this book is realistic? Why or why not?
(Students would likely say it is not realistic, since an earthquake of that magnitude is highly unlikely.)

Questions 11-12 (Creative Level)

11. Hold a roundtable discussion in which you propose ways to protect the Earth's resources today.
12. Debate whether or not genetically engineering humans is a good idea.

Across the Curriculum

Art/Music

1. Divide a piece of paper in half vertically. On the left, draw the Urb. On the right, draw Eden.
2. Learn to play chess, as Spaz does.
3. Write a song about Spaz's life in the Urb.
4. Draw or paint a new cover for the novel.
5. Using scenes from the novel, create a mural that depicts its main events.

Language Arts

1. In many ways, *The Last Book in the Universe* pays homage to Philip K. Dick's classic short story "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" Read the story and decide what elements Philbrick drew from in writing *The Last Book in the Universe*.
2. Ryter is working on his autobiography. Write a chapter in the book of your life.
3. Like most writers, Philbrick is a voracious reader, something he inherited from his parents. Among his favorite writers are suspense novelists like Elmore Leonard; classic writers like Mark Twain, Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, and Herman Melville; and more recent authors like John Steinbeck, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and Patrick O'Brien. Read a book from one of the authors on Philbrick's list. Explain what you liked best about it.
4. The Urb is filled with smog. "Smog" is a portmanteau word, a word created from two other words.

In this case, the two words are “smoke” + “fog” = smog. Find at least three other portmanteau words. Then create two of your own.

5. One of Philbrick’s most apparent themes is the vital role of the writer and the importance of reading. Explain why he values writing and reading so highly, based on what you read in *The Last Book in the Universe*.
6. Who is Don Quixote? In what ways is Ryter like him?
7. Mongo the Magnificent is like the wizard in *The Wizard of Oz*, an image without any substance. Watch the movie of *The Wizard of Oz* and explain what elements Philbrick took from it for this novel.
8. Define “poetry.” Share your favorite poem with a small group of classmates.

History/Social Studies

1. Little Face is a feral boy, a child raised in the wild. Research another feral child, such as the most famous case, Victor, the Wild Boy of Aveyron. Compare and contrast him to Little Face to determine how realistically Philbrick portrays Little Face.
2. *The Last Book in the Universe* paints a dark view of the future. What do you think the future holds? Make your predictions, including ideas about people, the environment, and education.
3. Ryter lists many historical figures who suffered from epilepsy. Choose one person from the list and find out how the disease affected his or her life and achievements.
4. Ryter gets to see a hologram of the Grand Canyon. Make a tourist brochure for this magnificent national park. Your brochure should include information about the Canyon but also entice people to visit it.

Speech/Debate

1. Debate whether or not people should be genetically improved.
2. In a roundtable discussion, explore ways to deal with gangs and bullying.

3. With a group of friends, decide on more flattering names for “Spaz” and Little Face.”
4. Imagine that you are Lanaya, trying to convince the seven Masters of Eden to let Spaz and Ryter stay. Deliver your speech to your classmates and have them vote to decide whether or not you make your case convincingly.
5. Working with some classmates, perform the trial scene from Chapter 29 for the class.

Science/Math

1. Learn more about monkeys. Explain to the class how they are similar to and different from the Monkey Boys in the novel.
2. Are neural probes possible? If so, how would they work?
3. What is epilepsy? What different ways can the disease present? Learn about this condition and share what you know in a poster.
4. Bean suffers from a bone marrow disease we later learn is leukemia. Find out how this blood cancer is treated today. What progress has been made concerning treatments in the past 10 years? The past five years?

Alternate Assessment

1. Write a character sketch for Spaz.
2. Imagine what life is like for Spaz a decade in the future. Working with some classmates, perform a skit in which you show how things have changed for him.
3. Read another novel by Rodman Philbrick and compare and contrast it to *The Last Book in the Universe*.
4. Create a scale model of Ryter’s “crib.”
5. Read another book about life in the future, such as George Orwell’s *1984*. Compare and contrast it to *The Last Book in the Universe*.

Vocabulary

Complete the crossword puzzle with the following words from *The Last Book in the Universe*.

WORD BANK

squalor abode assassin feral vandal
 edible smog barren vermin console

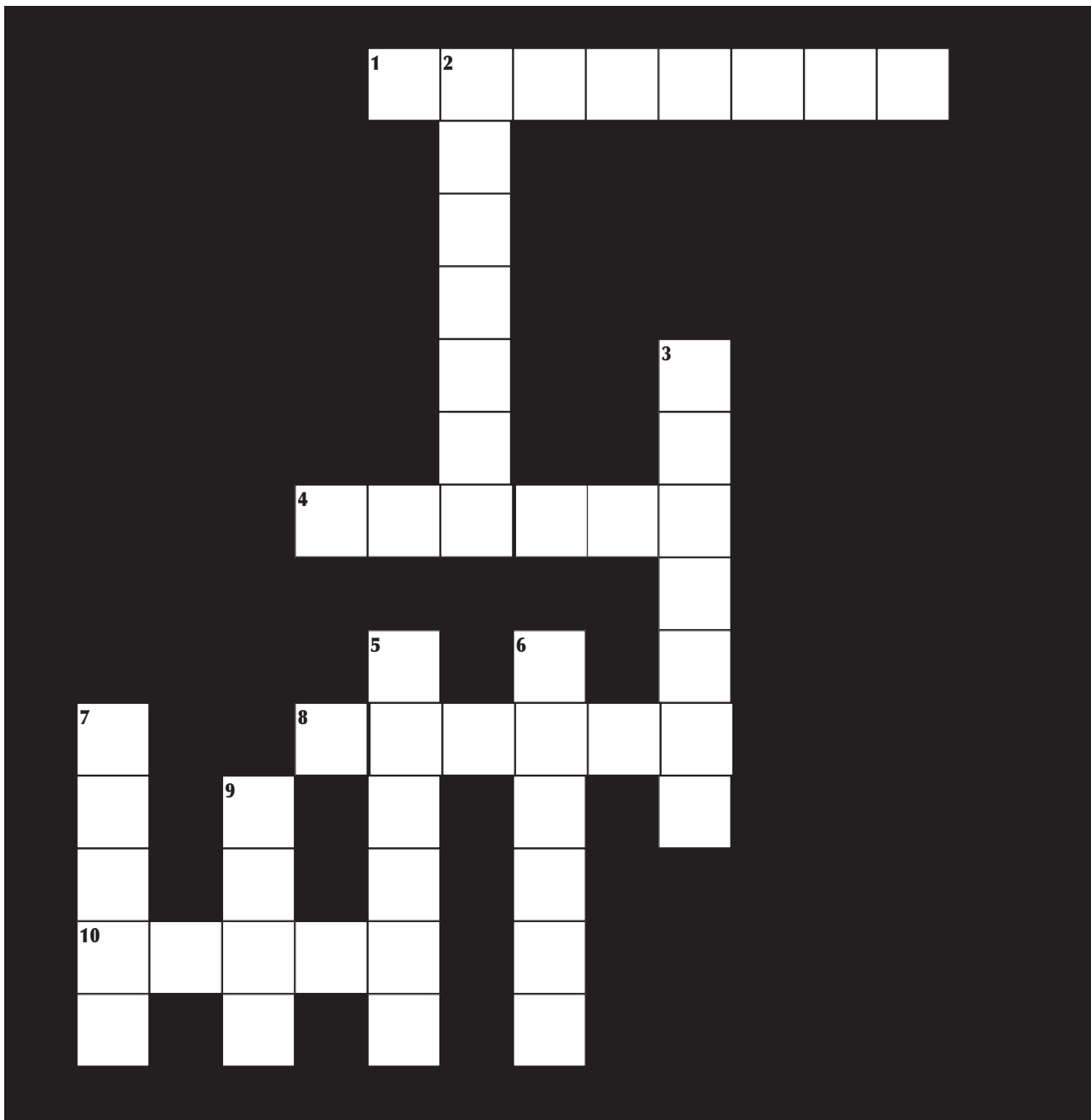
CLUES

Across

- 1. killer
- 4. rats
- 8. thief
- 10. home

Down

- 2. filth
- 3. make feel better
- 5. empty
- 6. good to eat
- 7. wild
- 9. air pollution



Comprehension Test A

Part I: Matching (20 points)

Match each description with a name from the list. Place the letter of your answer in the blank provided at left.

- | | |
|----------------|----------------|
| A. Spaz | F. Lotti Getts |
| B. Billy Bizmo | G. Bree |
| C. Bean | H. Vida Bleek |
| D. Charly | I. Lanaya |
| E. Ryter | J. Little Face |

- ____ 1. Lanaya's female contributor (mother)
- ____ 2. The beautiful proov who will one day be a Master of Eden
- ____ 3. The little boy whom Bree adopts
- ____ 4. The Boss of the Vandals
- ____ 5. Bean's father
- ____ 6. The novel's narrator; son of Billy Bizmo
- ____ 7. The boss of the underworld traders
- ____ 8. The elderly man who is writing a book
- ____ 9. Spaz's sister
- ____ 10. The boss of the Bangers

Part II: Sentence Completion (20 points)

Circle the term that best completes each of the following statements.

1. Spaz, the narrator, can't probe because he has **(leukemia, epilepsy)**.
2. Only genetically improved people called **(proovs, improves)** can get into Eden.
3. Spaz lives in The **(Forbidden Zone, Urb)**.
4. **(Acid rain, Bombs)** constantly fall from the sky.
5. Spaz makes his living **(writing, stealing)** for others.
6. Ryter insists on coming with Spaz on the dangerous journey across the **(three, ten)** latches.
7. Ryter suggests they travel via the **(Desert, Pipe)**.
8. The little boy has only one word: **(“chox,” “hello.”)**
9. The leader of the Monkey Boys is **(George of the Jungle, Mongo the Magnificent)**.
10. Lanaya is disbelieving when Bleek reveals that the probe runner comes from **(outer space, Eden)**.

Comprehension Test A (Page 2)

Part III: True/False (20 points)

Mark the following statements either T for true or F if a part is false.

- ___ 1. The Furies attack, but stop when Lanaya says they bring offerings to the head of the traders.
- ___ 2. The Latch Queen is really Spaz's mother, but he does not find out until the end of the novel.
- ___ 3. Ryter, Spaz, and Lanaya get caught in the middle of a power struggle between two gangs.
- ___ 4. Bean is not very happy to see Spaz because she does not have happy memories of their childhood.
- ___ 5. Lanaya falls into a coma and Bean agrees to take her to Eden to try to find a cure.
- ___ 6. In Eden, Lanaya is a princess who lives in a beautiful castle.
- ___ 7. Lanaya has been genetically engineered to be one of the Masters who make all the decisions for the proof world.
- ___ 8. Ryter travels to the southwest so he can visit the remains of the Grand Canyon.
- ___ 9. Spaz turns out to be a brilliant chess player, winning in his first game against Jin.
- ___ 10. Ryter is brutally murdered, a scapegoat because the proofs have deactivated the probes.

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

- 1. Which character in the book did you admire the most? Why?
- 2. Summarize the events in *The Last Book in the Universe*.
- 3. Compare and contrast the imaginary world in this novel and our world today.
- 4. Argue that Spaz will or will not make a difference in his world as he matures.

Comprehension Test B

Part I: Citation Analysis (20 points)

Explain the significance of each of the following citations from the novel.

1. Because I never thought about the future. If you want to be down with the Bangers, you can't think about the future.
2. "Nothing of value," he says, pretending to yawn. "Just a book, is all."
3. "That's my point, silly. Because you're not a nobody."
4. "The backtimes had a legend about it," he tells me. "Eden was a paradise."
5. But I know who the real hero is, and it isn't me or even the brave Lanaya. It's an old man with a white beard and a walking stick and a heart so big it won't let him stop thinking he can change the world by writing things down in a book that no one will ever read.

Part II: Identification (20 points)

Briefly describe each person, place, or thing and explain why it is important in the story.

1. chox
2. Ryter's book
3. probes
4. epilepsy
5. chess

Comprehension Test B (Page 2)

Part III: Matching (20 points)

Complete each of the following descriptions with a name from the list that follows. Place the letter of your answer in the blank provided at left. Use each name only once.

- | | |
|----------------|----------------|
| A. Spaz | F. Lotti Getts |
| B. Billy Bizmo | G. Kay |
| C. Bean | H. Vida Bleek |
| D. Charly | I. Little Face |
| E. Ryter | J. Bree |

- ___ 1. Bean's mother; Spaz's step-mother
- ___ 2. Lanaya's contributor, the woman who adopts Little Face
- ___ 3. The teenager who suffers from epilepsy
- ___ 4. Bean's father; he throws Spaz out of the house
- ___ 5. The Latch Queen; also called the White Widow
- ___ 6. Spaz's beloved younger sister
- ___ 7. Boy who remains in Eden
- ___ 8. The fat trader
- ___ 9. Spaz's father
- ___ 10. The elderly man who serves as a surrogate father to Spaz

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

- 1. Describe Spaz's life. Tell how it is the same and different from yours.
- 2. Compare and contrast the Urb and Eden. Be sure to explain what Eden represents.
- 3. Analyze how Ryter functions as Spaz's substitute father.
- 4. Explain the government in the Urb.

Answer Key

VOCABULARY

Across

1. assassin
4. vermin
8. vandal
10. abode

Down

2. squalor
3. console
5. barren
6. edible
7. feral
9. smog

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Matching (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. G | 6. A |
| 2. I | 7. H |
| 3. J | 8. E |
| 4. F | 9. C |
| 5. D | 10. B |

Part II: Sentence Completion (20 points)

- | | |
|--------------|---------------------------|
| 1. epilepsy | 6. three |
| 2. prooves | 7. Pipe |
| 3. Urb | 8. chox |
| 4. Acid rain | 9. Mongo the Magnificent, |
| 5. stealing | 10. Eden |

Part III: True/False (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. T | 6. T |
| 2. F | 7. T |
| 3. T | 8. F |
| 4. F | 9. F |
| 5. F | 10. T |

Part IV. Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Quote Analysis (20 points)

1. This quote shows that Spaz, as with the people in the world before the Big Shake, thinks only of the present. Philbrick suggests that people have to plan for the future, especially with regard to the environment. This quote also shows the hopelessness of Spaz's world. There is no point in thinking of the future when you don't think you will ever have one.
2. Under orders from the gang that controls his area, Spaz steals all the valuables from the elderly man named Ryter. The old man hides a pile of papers. Spaz is clever and realizes that Ryter's feigned indifference reveals that the papers are very valuable. Indeed they are, for the papers represent the only record of the present. Thus, they have incal-

culable value to the future residents of this blighted world. This scene introduces the theme of the importance of writing and reading.

3. Ryter realizes that Billy Bizmo, the merciless mob boss, has not killed Spaz for a very specific reason. He is correct. Later we discover that Spaz is Billy's son.
4. In the novel, Eden is indeed a paradise, a land of blue skies, clear streams, and green grass. It is Earth in the present day, which suggests that Philbrick wants us to appreciate the majesty of our world and take steps now to preserve it for future generations.
5. Here, Philbrick presents the heroism of all writers who soldier on despite the fact that they are never likely to get published. And if they do get published, few people will ever read their books.

Part II: Identification (20 points)

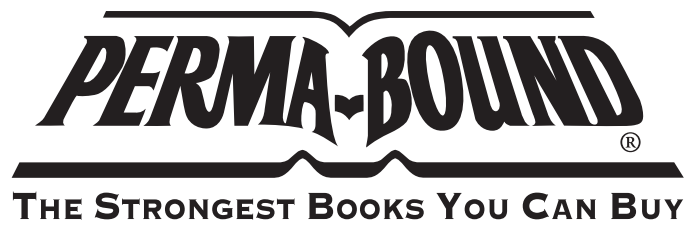
1. Chox is a prepackaged food item that tastes like chocolate. Like a soldier going into a war zone, Spaz gives some chox to a little boy he meets. The boy is entranced by the taste and follows Spaz on his trek.
2. Ryter's book symbolizes humankind's hope for the future. The very act of writing it suggests that there will be a future and that people will care about the past.
3. Probes are electrodes inserted into the brain. They transmit videos directly into the brain. People in Eden send them to the Urb to turn the people there into mindless animals and thus make them less likely to survive as they kill each other.
4. Epilepsy is the brain disease that afflicts Spaz. Because of it, he cannot use the mindprobes, which prevents him from losing his memory.
5. Jin is one of the very best chess players in Eden. He plays chess with Bean and she beats him the very first time she plays. This shows her superior intelligence, but it is still not sufficient to allow her to live in Eden.

Part III: Matching (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. G | 6. C |
| 2. J | 7. I |
| 3. A | 8. H |
| 4. D | 9. B |
| 5. F | 10. E |

Part IV. Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.



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