



## Discussion & Study Guide

# THE BRILLIANT FALL OF GIANNA Z by Kate Messner

About the Book: Gianna Zales has a lot on her plate this fall – a father who drives her to school in the family hearse, a mother who’s turned into the junk food police, a little brother who thinks he’s a member of the paparazzi, and a grandmother who leaves false teeth in the refrigerator. Worst of all, she’s left her 7<sup>th</sup> grade leaf collection to do at the last minute. It’s a monster project, and Gianna will miss cross-country sectionals if she doesn’t meet the deadline. She’ll need the help of her geeky friend, Zig, and some brilliant ideas of her own to pull it off.

About the Author: Kate Messner is a middle school teacher and mom who has helped with hundreds of leaf collection projects over the years. She’s especially fond of catalpa trees and sugar maples. Kate lives on Lake Champlain with her husband and two kids and loves spending time in the woods. Visit her website: [www.katemessner.com](http://www.katemessner.com)

### **Discussion and Journaling Questions for Chapters 1-4**

- Based on the opening scene in Mrs. Loring's science class, what kind of student do you think Gianna might be? Which student in the class do you most resemble, and why?
- Why do you think Gianna is so horrified by the idea of Bianca replacing her at cross-country sectionals?
- How does Gianna react to Nonna getting lost at the market? What emotions do you think she's feeling? Why do you think Gianna's mother refused to talk much about the incident at the market?
- *Journal Prompt: Write a paragraph describing a place that you love, using as many different sensory details as possible.*
- How would you describe Gianna's relationship with Zig in the beginning of the book? Does it seem to be changing? If so, how?
- How do you think Gianna's bedroom reflects her personality? If someone walked into your room at home right now, what conclusions might they draw about your personality?
- *Journal Prompt: In Chapter 4, Gianna remembers a Halloween when her costume disappeared underneath a big winter coat. Describe your best or worst Halloween from when you were younger. What did your costume look like? How did you feel wearing it?*

## Discussion and Journaling Questions for Chapters 5-10

- ❑ In Chapter 5, Gianna talks about her frustration with tests, saying, “I’m not a one-bubble kind of girl.” What do you think she means by that? With what kinds of tests do you tend to be the most successful?
- ❑ Gianna often daydreams in class, but she finds herself particularly interested in the English lesson about Robert Frost’s poem “Birches.” Why do you think this poem captures her attention?
- ❑ *Journal Prompt: Ruby, the target of Bianca and Mary Beth’s gossip in Chapter 5, carries around a green marble notebook. Imagine that you’re Ruby, writing in that notebook after school. What would you write about what happened in the lunch line?*
- ❑ Gianna isn’t close friends with Ruby, but she’s especially upset when she hears about Ruby’s grandmother. Why do you think this news has such an effect on her?
- ❑ Why do you think Gianna’s mother keeps insisting that nothing is wrong with Nonna, even after the incident with the cookies?
- ❑ *Journal Prompt: Mr. Randolph is the kind of school principal who probably loves to write letters to parents, telling them what their kids have done wrong. Imagine that you are Mr. Randolph and write a letter to Mr. and Mrs. Zales to tell them what happened in your yard. Be sure to use Mr. Randolph’s strict voice!*

- ❑ Gianna worries about what she'll say to Ruby at the funeral home. What advice would you give her? Have you ever needed to comfort a friend who has lost someone they love? What kinds of things did you say?
- ❑ *Journal Prompt: Imagine that you can hear Ruby talking to her grandmother at the casket. "Hi, Grandma...It's me..." What else would she say?*

### **Discussion and Journaling Questions for Chapters 11-15**

- ❑ Why do you think Gianna's mother is becoming so involved in her leaf project?
- ❑ Everything possible seems to be going wrong with Gianna's leaf project. How much of it do you think is her fault?
- ❑ Do you think Gianna is more like her mother or Nonna? How does the walk on the Frost Trail show the differences between the women?
- ❑ When Gianna is up in the tree, she watches and listens to her mother and grandmother and says, "...it's a little easier to imagine a Mom other than the list-making, tofu-eating, three-ring binder Mom of right now." Why do you think she's suddenly able to see her mom in a different way?
- ❑ *Journal Prompt: Write about a time when you learned something about someone that caused you to change the way you think about him or her.*
- ❑ How would you have reacted if you found what Gianna found when she returned to the locker room? Why do you think she chose not to tell her coach what happened? Would you have made the same choice?

- *Journal Prompt: Imagine that Bianca and Mary Beth are online chatting after they get home from cross-country practice. Write the transcript of their chat about what happened*
- How do you see Gianna's emotions changing as Dr. Hebert examines Nonna? How do you think you'd feel if you were in her situation?

### **Discussion and Journaling Questions for Chapters 16-20**

- How much do you think Nonna knows about her condition? How long do you think she's known that something was wrong?
- Gianna seems to appreciate Zig more and more as her family situation gets more difficult. What makes him such a good friend?
- A line in the Robert Frost poem "Birches" reads, "Earth's the right place for love..." Nonna says it's her favorite part of the poem. Why might that line speak to her so strongly?
- *Journal Prompt: Imagine that you are Gianna's guidance counselor or tutor. What advice would you give her? With just a couple days left, how would you help her to organize her time and finish her project? Write her a letter or outline explaining what you think she should do.*
- The longer Gianna searches for Nonna, the more frantic she seems to get. How does her imagination make things worse?

- *Journal Prompt: Try to remember a time when you were worried about someone you loved. What did you do? How did you feel, emotionally and physically? Was there anything that helped you to feel less anxious?*

### **Discussion and Journaling Questions for Chapters 21-26**

- How do the different members of Gianna's family react to Nonna getting lost?
- *Journal Prompt: Imagine that you are Gianna and you haven't spoken to your mother since you found Nonna in the rain. What will you finally say to her about everything that's happened? Write a letter to your mom to leave on the counter so she'll see it in the morning.*
- What role do you think Ian plays in the Zales family? Does anyone in your family remind you of Ian?
- What do you think of Gianna's mother's plans to keep Nonna safe? What other suggestions might you make to the family?
- What do you think of the way Gianna's mother solved the leaf collection problem? Should Gianna turn in the project?
- Why do you think Gianna feels worse when she sees the other students' leaf projects?
- How is the new leaf collection a better reflection of Gianna's personality? Can you think of any other creative ways Gianna might have presented her leaves?
- *Journal Prompt: Imagine that you are Mrs. Loring, grading Gianna's leaf project. What grade will she receive, and what comments will you write to her on her evaluation?*

- When Gianna returns home, her mother and Nonna are writing down the famous wedding cookie recipe. Why do you think Nonna's wedding cookies are so important in this story?
- Would you consider the ending of this book a happy ending? Why or why not?
- *Journal Prompt: Write a letter from Gianna to Nonna, to go at the beginning of Nonna's memory book, telling her what it's for and why the family created it, as well as anything else you'd like to say.*

## **Interdisciplinary Connections**

### **Science:**

**Leaf Identification:** Create your own leaf collection. Take a walk through your neighborhood and see how many different kinds of leaves you can find. Be sure to ask permission before picking any leaves from trees on private property. Before you collect the leaves, you'll want to note whether they're arranged on the branch in an alternate or opposite pattern. (Opposite means you'd see two leaves coming off the stem in the same place. Alternate means they'd be staggered.) When you get home, you can identify your leaves using a pocket field guide or an online guide like one of these to walk you through the steps:

*Arbor Day Foundation: What Tree Is That? Guides for Eastern and Western U.S.*

<http://www.arborday.org/trees/whattree/>

*Virginia Tech Department of Forestry Leaf Key*

<http://www.fw.vt.edu/dendro/dendrology/syllabus/key/location.htm>

**Research:** Use resources at your library or online to learn more about Alzheimer's Disease. Write a letter to Gianna, telling her what you've learned and what her family might expect if Nonna has Alzheimer's Disease.

**Medicinal Plants:** When Nonna talks about cedar being used as a healing plant, Gianna wonders about putting some of the leaves in Nonna's tea. Do some research in your library or online to learn about trees that have been used for medicinal purposes. Make a



chart, showing the tree's common name, scientific name, the parts of the tree used as medicine, and what symptoms it has been used to treat.

Language Arts:

Writing Descriptive Details: Read the description of Gianna's bedroom at the beginning of Chapter 4. Try to sketch a floor plan for her room, based on that description, including as many details as you can. Then, write a description of your own bedroom, including descriptive details. Trade papers with a friend and see if you can create a floor plan for your friend's room based on his or her description. Then trade back and see how close you came!

Poetry of Robert Frost: Robert Frost had a house in Vermont, not far from where this story takes place. Read some of Robert Frost's poems. Write a response journal like the one Gianna wrote for her English class, reflecting on one of Frost's poems that you read and talking about what the poem means to you.

Art:

Artist Studies: Gianna loves the work of famous artists like Pablo Picasso and Jackson Pollock. Spend some time looking at these two artists' paintings. What do you think of their work? Why do you think Gianna is drawn to them? You can also view the work of many other artists at websites for the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

<http://www.moma.org/>

<http://www.metmuseum.org/>

Make a list of other artists you think Gianna might appreciate!

Tree sketches: Gianna sketches her leaves as a way of dealing with her stress over the project, but drawing or sketching is also a tool that scientists use to help them study things in nature more closely. Choose a tree from your yard or neighborhood, and create a sketch-study of that tree. Sketch the tree from a distance, paying attention to its overall shape and form. Then sketch one branch, showing how the leaves are arranged. Then sketch a single leaf in as much detail as possible.

Music:

Soundtrack: If *The Brilliant Fall of Gianna Z* were made into a movie, what songs would be part of the soundtrack? Make a list of songs and artists to fit your favorite scenes in the book.