

SUPERZERO by Darrel Bristow-Bovey

Chapter 1: You can't spell zero without a Zed

Pre-reading

1. Have you ever felt 'different'? Why?
1. *This is an open-ended question designed to build or activate background knowledge. It is more likely than not that each of the learners has had this experience.*
2. Who or what is a superhero? Name one and say what is 'super' about him or her.
2. *A superhero is someone who has superhuman powers and uses these to protect defenceless people, to prevent disasters, and to hold evil or criminal people in check. Learners can choose any superhero: e.g. Superman (able to fly through the air at tremendous speed; leap a huge distance; pick up incredibly heavy objects like an ocean liner; withstand attack (skin cannot be pierced)).*

During reading

3. Why does Zed feel he is different from the other children?
3. *He seems to have mishaps all the time, his coordination is very poor so he is no good at sport and he has poor social skills. Unlike the others, he feels ill at ease with others of own age and does not know what to say.*

Post-reading

4. What is Zed's point of view about bad luck? Why does he feel this way?
4. *He believes that everyone has much the same amount of bad luck. Since he has used up a great deal of his share of bad luck already, he feels that he will have an easier time later on.*
5. Why does he get on so well with Katey?
5. *Katey is very kind and she knows when to keep quiet. Even though she sees his shortcomings, she remains his loyal friend.*
6. Zed says he has had "an adventure from which he barely escaped with his life". Suggest some possibilities.
6. *This is open-ended. The question demonstrates the learners' ability to read between the lines, using the insights they have gained into Zed's character. Accept anything that would be feasible.*
7. Write down an example of a simile from the chapter.
7. *"As big as a gorilla" or "A head like a flowerpot"*

Chapter 2: The box of secrets

Pre-reading

1. Why are garages, old loft rooms, and attics often so interesting? What are some of the things that are usually stored there?
1. *You never know what you will find there. People usually store old books, photographs, old clothes and furniture or household items that they do not have space for.*
2. Which comic book superhero is your favourite? Which super powers would you like to have?
2. *This is open-ended. It encourages identification with Zed.*

During reading

3. Why does Zed enjoy the comics so much?
3. *This is open-ended. It provides an opportunity for learners to show how good an understanding they have of Zed. [The comics make him feel special because he feels they were left just for him./ They take him away from his dull and rather unsuccessful life to a very exciting world of high achievement.]*

Post-reading

4. The words “used to be parked” and “those were your dad’s” seem to indicate that Zed’s father is dead. Why would Zed enjoy going through his father’s things?
4. *He probably misses his father a great deal. Going through the comics gives him a chance to find out what his father enjoyed doing and he is able to share in that pleasure.*
5. Are the words, “a sea of comics” a good way to describe the hundreds of comics lying there in the blue box? Why?
5. *Open-ended. This is an opportunity for learners to explore the metaphor and argue their point of view successfully.*
6. What does his mother think about adults reading comics?
6. *Zed’s mother disapproves of adults reading comics. Her view is coloured by the fact that her husband spent hours reading comics when he could have spent the time with her or doing useful jobs around the house.*
7. a) What is the difference between something you “need” and something you “want”?
- b) Why did Zed’s father feel that Zed would “need” the comics instead of just “want” them do you think?
7. a) *Something you “need” is essential, for instance warm clothes in winter. Something you “want” is something that goes beyond what you need, for example, designer label warm clothes.*
- b) *He knew that Zed would find them useful research for being a superhero and understand his own destiny better. In that sense they were part of his essential equipment.*
8. Suggest why Zed sits in the box with the comics all over his legs, instead of taking them out and reading them one at a time?
8. *Open-ended. Any valid suggestion. For example, he was revelling in the experience of reading these and was trying to work out which was the one his father liked best.*
9. What does the voice tell him to do? Is this sensible? Why? Why not?
9. *The voice tells him to ride down the steep hill instead of pushing his bicycle down as he normally does. This is not a sensible idea because it would be dangerous for any of the children to try to ride down; Zed is prone to accidents so it would be even more dangerous for him.*
10. What did Zed do to avoid being hit by the bus? Why does this make him feel like a superhero?
10. *He slid under the bus between the front wheels of the bus and came out between the back wheels, still on his bicycle. Although he has some scrapes and bruises, he escapes being killed or badly injured by the bus. This makes him feel like a superhero because this is a feat that he thinks would be impossible for a normal human being.*

Chapter 3: Ulric Chilvers

Pre-reading

1. Who are Clark Kent and Peter Parker? Who are their “alter egos” (super hero identities)?
1. *Clark Kent is Superman and Peter Parker is Spiderman.*
2. Has someone made you feel a little nervous and frightened (given you ‘the creeps’ when you met them? Why?
2. *Personal response. Clear reason must be given.*

During reading

3. What message do the comics have for Zed?
3. *The message is that he is a superhero.*

Post-reading

4. Why do you think that Katey giggles – something she never does – when she first meets Ulric?
4. *She giggles because she finds him attractive./ She is feeling self-conscious.*

5. Zed appears to be losing confidence in his own superhero status. Why? Which super powers does he not have so far?
5. *Ulric has scoffed at him. He does not have presence, superhuman strength, superhearing or the ability to fly.*
6. What history is there between Zed and Daniel Dundee?
6. *In the match between Bighton Primary and Wentville Under 12s, Zed saved the penalty goal that Daniel Dundee scored. Daniel was furious and held a grudge against him.*
7. What does Zed learn about Bighton School from Jerome, the caretaker? Does this surprise you or not?
7. *The caretaker saw Daniel Dundee on the night of the fire. This is not surprising because he seems to be the kind of person that would destroy things.*
8. What is different about Buckman's New-World Circus?
8. *Buckman's New World Circus has what it unkindly called "Freak Shows" – people who are unusual, like a woman with a beard, are on show.*
9. What makes Zed say that Katey should go to the circus with Ulric Chilvers instead of him?
9. *Zed feels resentful about the kind of time that Katey has been spending with Ulric. He has also lost confidence in himself.*
10. Write down an example of onomatopoeia from the first page of this chapter.
10. *Buzzing*
11. What does the expression "He couldn't put his finger on it" mean?
11. *He could not work out what it was. He knew something was wrong but could not work out what it was.*

Chapter 4: A night at the circus

Pre-reading

1. What are the main attractions at a circus?
1. *Personal response.*
2. What does a medium/spiritual consultant do?
2. *A medium / spiritual consultant claims to tell the future and sometimes to communicate messages from the dead to the living.*

During reading

3. What makes Ulric's behaviour suspicious?
3. *Ulric is drinking a yellow can of Iced Tea like the one that Zed saw crushed near Madame Hoblidaya's tent. His eyes are glowing brightly.*

Post-reading

4. What does Madame Hoblidaya warn Zed about when she looks at his palm?
4. *She warns him that something dangerous is going to happen.*
5. Explain the strange stunt that Sello performs in your own words.
5. *Holding a light bulb as big as his head, Sello goes into a tank with electric eels in it. He then moves his head back and puts the metal stem of the bulb into his mouth. This makes the light bulb glow red and then white. He is using the electricity generated by the electric eels to power the bulb*
6. Why was no one in the audience keen to volunteer to help Kimiko in her act?
6. *She was using a crocodile in her act and people in the audience felt they would be risking their lives.*
7. Katey volunteers to help Kimiko. What does this tell you about her?
7. *Katey is daring/ willing to take risks/ willing to help others.*
8. What seems like a dangerous stunt is really a trick.

- a) What is the purpose of the stunt?
- b) What is the smoke used for?
8. a) *The purpose of the stunt is to get as much publicity as they can. It is likely to draw in the police and there will be threats to shut them down. This kind of sensation attracts attention and far more people are likely to come to the circus.*
- b) *The smoke is used to hide what is really going on. No one can be sure about who they are seeing or what the people are doing.*
9. What signs are there in this chapter that Zed could be a superhero?
9. *When he sees that Katey is in danger, he moves speedily to her rescue. He leaps over the barricade and holds the crocodile down, despite its huge power and the smoke that is burning his eyes and his throat. He uses the palm of his hand to cover up the crocodile's right eye so it moves closer to the step Zed wants to put between its jaws so it is not able to bite anyone.*
10. Would you say the description of Madame Hoblidaya is stereotypical? Give reasons for your answer.
10. *Personal response*

Chapter 5. Even superheroes need moms

Pre-reading

1. Why is it important for people to listen without asking questions when we have something important to share?
1. *This question is designed to build or activate background knowledge. It would make a good whole class activity. [It is important for people to remain silent so that we can tell the whole story as well as we can. Interruptions are distracting for the speaker and the audience and make it difficult to give a clear picture.]*

Post-reading

2. Why does Zed decide to tell his mother everything, even his own feelings and his own thoughts?
2. *Zed is aware that his mother is really worried about him. He has become moody, he goes into the garage in the middle of the night and he has come home scraped and bruised, with torn clothes*
3. Why does his mother cry after hearing the story?
3. *She cries because she realises that like his father he thinks he is a superhero. She knows just how much difficulty lies ahead for him.*
4. Do you think that Zed has been a superhero in the story so far? Why?
4. *Zed has shown signs of being a superhero. He has shown his concern to rescue the helpless and his strength and ingenuity by going to Katey's rescue so quickly and then managing to hold down the powerful crocodile. He also shown his ability to do more than ordinary children by cycling down a very steep hill and managing to avoid being knocked down (or even killed) by the bus by sliding successfully right under it.*
5. Zed's mom is "sobbing". Write down a synonym for "sob". Why is this choice of word effective?
5. *Cry. To sob means to cry uncontrollably and this shows Zed's mom's immense sadness.*

Chapter 6: A place beside the sea

Pre-reading

1. What do you think is special about grandmothers?
1. *This is open-ended. The learners can mention any quality they think is special.*

During reading

2. What does Zed find out about destiny (the things that cannot be changed in one's future)?
2. *His grandmother's view is that however hard you try, you cannot change your future.*

Post-reading

3. Zed's mother takes him to visit his grandma.
 - a) What is her reason for doing so?
 - b) What happened to Zed's father many years ago and how did his mother help him?
3.
 - a) *She hopes that her mother-in-law will help Zed. Her mother-in-law had helped her son, Zed's father, many years ago.*
 - b) *She spoke to him about what being a superhero entailed and was able to help him understand himself.*
4. For a number of reasons, Grandma did not tell her son (Zed's father) that he was a superhero. Which two of these reasons do you think were the most important ones?
4. *Learners can choose any two. [She hoped that he would not realise that he was a superhero; she wanted him to have a normal life for as long as possible; she was hoping that he would not turn out to be a superhero after all.]*
5. What is a supervillain?
5. *A supervillain is similar to a superhero in that he or she has special powers. However, a supervillain uses his or her power for evil purposes.*
6. Grandma says that supervillains have an advantage over superheroes, what is it?
6. *They are underhanded, secretive and will stop at nothing to succeed, unlike superheroes who always act openly and behave fairly.*
7. Grandma mentions three kinds of evil in the world. Which do you think is the worst?
7. *This is an open-ended question. Accept any choice the learners make. There could be a good follow-up discussion allowing learners to weigh up the different choices and offer reasons why a particular evil is worse than the two others.*
8. Would you like to be a superhero like Zed and his father before him? Why/why not?
8. *This is open-ended. Accept any answer that is well argued.*

Chapter 7: A supervillain reveals himself

Pre-reading

1. What has your experience at school been? How easy is it for some children to have a bad influence on other children?
1. *Personal response. It allows children to explore one of the issues of the book. This could be a good link with Life Orientation.*

During reading

2. What evidence can you see of disturbing behaviour in the learners of Wentville Primary?
2. *Someone of them have been vandalising the school – toilets have been broken, there is graffiti on the walls and a row of windows has been broken.*

Post-reading

3. What changes can Zed see in some of the other learners?
3. *Some of them have a sly look on their faces, Katey does not look at him and is humming a tune.*
4. The pupils of Katey's eyes are fuzzy around the edges. (Note that she keeps insisting that everyone is fine, except for Zed.). What do you think has happened to her?
4. *She has been hypnotised and then been subjected to mind bending.*
5. What does Mr Minardi threaten to do? Notice here that Ulric seems very worried about this.
5. *Mr Minardi threatens to cancel the school talent show.*
4. What does Zed mean when he says to Ulric, "I know who you are and I know what you are"?
4. *He knows that Ulric is a supervillain.*
5. What is a rival? How did Ulric recognise Zed as his rival?

5. *Someone who wants to be more successful than you. /Someone who is up against you. Ulric recognised that Zed was his rival when he felt a cold, electric current between them when they first met.*
6. What does Ulric do to try to make Zed change from superhero to supervillain?
 6. *He tells taunts Zed that supervillains are always more powerful and more frightening than superheroes.*
 7. As far as Ulric is concerned zeros are worthless. Why are Zed, the kitten and many other people, seen as zeros in Ulric's eyes?
 7. *Ulric sees them as trusting, weak and willing to be followers.*
 8. What does Ulric do after he states that "only the strong get what they want"?
 8. *He drops the terrified kitten into a box that has a puff adder in it. When the snake remains motionless, he kicks the sides of the box until the snake is aroused and swallows the kitten.*
 - a) What is your view of his action?
 - b) How does Ulric's action prove Grandma's point that "supervillains don't play by the rules"?
 8. a) *This is open-ended. Learners must be free to express their own opinion. The writer wants readers to see the action as cruel and despicable.*
 - b) *His action is cruel and immoral.*
 9. What literary device does the author use in describing the world in terms of binary code?
 9. *Metaphor*

Chapter 8: The view through a high window

Pre-reading

1. What ways do you use to organise your thinking, especially when you are a bit stressed?
 1. *This is open-ended. This is an opportunity to link English with Life Orientation.*

During reading

2. What are the signs that Ulric is gaining more and more power?
 2. *The size of Ulric's gang has increased and even some of the teachers seem to be under his spell.*

Post-reading

3. What makes it impossible for Zed to tell anyone at the school what Ulric and his cronies did to the kitten?

It seems that Ulric and his cronies are able to do as they like. They do not even come to class.
4. What do the words, "Ulric Chilvers seems to have the power to change people's personalities" tell us about his powers? Name someone who does appear to have changed.
 4. *It seems that he is able to manipulate people's minds and consequently their behaviour. He seems to hypnotise them. An example is Chris who sometimes seems to look at people blankly as if he does not even see them. He does not come to class and he now plays classical music not rap. He does whatever Ulric asks him to do.*
5. Why is it so important for Zed to get into the music rehearsals?
 5. *Zed is convinced that the music rehearsals are the means of changing the behaviour and thinking of the learners.*
6. What kind of music Ulric is playing over and over again? Why is he doing this?
 6. *He is playing classical music in order to hypnotise some of the other learners.*
7. Zed has to climb up the drain pipe to see into the music room.
 - a) Why is it an advantage to be small at this point?
 - b) Explain what Zed sees Ulric doing when he looks through the high window.
7. a) *The drain pipe is not very robust. Someone bigger would not be able to climb up it.*
 - b) *He sees Ulric twiddling the knobs and switches of the control panel inside a briefcase so that he will tune into the frequencies that will place all the learners in the rehearsal room (except for Chris) completely under the spell of the music that is playing.*

8. How does Zed try to cover up the noise he makes when he almost falls from the window ledge?
8. *He tosses the pigeon into the room to make it seem that the pigeon had been making the noise.*
9. What is particularly cruel about the way that Ulric kills the pigeon?
9. *He first calms the bird down. Just when it feels it is safe, he breaks its neck. He then says to Zed, "I think this is yours" cruelly underlining that he has only killed it because he knows Zed threw it into the room.*

Chapter 9: The tide begins to turn

Pre-reading

1. Things have been going in Ulric's favour. What do you think "the tide begins to turn" means?
1. *It means that things will start moving in Zed's favour. The literal meaning is that the tide starts to flow in the opposite direction.*

During reading

2. What evidence against Ulric does Zed actually have?
2. *He knows how Ulric has been using music to hypnotise the other learners and he knows how cruel and destructive he has been, but he does not have evidence that he would be able to use to persuade others.*
3. Why is Zed's mother so upset with him?
3. *Zed seems to be guilty of serious misdemeanours. He did not return to the detention class and he has also been identified as the person who has been vandalising the school.*

Post-reading

4. Why does Zed say that "Chilvers will always win". How is he feeling at this moment?
4. *He says this because he is feeling completely dispirited.*
5. How does Zed manage to move from Dvorak's Ninth Symphony "From the New World" to Buckman's New-World Circus in his thoughts? Is there any connection do you think?
5. *This is open-ended. Learners should be able to give a reason for their view.*
6. What advice did his grandma give to Zed?
6. *She advised him to study so he can be proactive rather than be caught unawares.*
7. Why must Zed "keep one step ahead" at this point?
7. *He needs to get to the circus before Ulric realises that he knows there is a connection.*
8. Explain the expression "the tide begins to turn".
8. *It comes from the tides of the sea, low tide/high tide. It refers to a change beginning to take place.*

Chapter 10: The storm breaks

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Pre-reading

1. What is an "emergency fund"? How important is it to have one?
1. *An emergency fund is money that you do not spend unless you have an urgent need to do so. Its importance depends on your circumstances. If you are rich, it will not be important. If you have only enough money to meet your immediate needs, it could be a very useful way of dealing with unexpected situations that have to be dealt with immediately.*

During reading

2. What do you think Zed should do to stay ahead? Do you think his idea of going to the circus is a good one? Why?
2. *Open-ended – any suggestion consistent with the story should be accepted, as should a logical reason for their opinion as to whether going to the circus is a good idea or not.*

Post-reading

3. Why do you think Zed is dressed all in black?

3. *He wants to draw as little attention to himself as possible.*
4. No one thinks anything of it when Zed walks through the circus area. What important discovery has he made?
4. *He has realised that you need to give the impression that you know what you are about. If you move confidently, people assume that you have a right to be there.*
5. Provide three adjectives to describe the kind of a person Ulric's father was.
5. Suggestions: *cruel, inventive, power-hungry, immoral.*
6. Why would a circus be a "refuge (place where they can feel safe) for those who didn't belong elsewhere"? Give an example of someone who might be treated unkindly or be unable to get a job in the ordinary world.
6. *Everyone at the circus is unusual so people who are a little different are able to feel at home. Many examples are possible. One example is that a dwarf might be treated unkindly in the ordinary world.*
7. a) What is a hypnotist?
7. b) Who has been hypnotised so far?
7. a) *A hypnotist is someone who puts people under a spell, usually for medical or entertainment reasons.*
7. b) *Chris, Katey and a number of the learners as well as some of the teachers.*
8. Which "frequencies" is Ulric using to take over people's minds? Where are they hidden?
8. *These are 'frequencies' generated by a machine designed by Ulric's father. It is hidden in a briefcase so that they won't be traced.*
9. What is the most important piece of information that Madame Hoblidaya's gives Zed?
9. *Madame Hoblidaya tells Zed that Ulric has the machine that his father was working on. This turns people into zombies.*
10. Name the literary device: "I felt his dark light".
10. *Antitheses*

Chapter 11: The fire underwater

Pre-reading

1. In your reading or TV viewing you will have come across many dangerous sea creatures. Name two of these and what makes them dangerous.
1. *Open-ended. Some examples of what learners could choose: e.g. octopus, stingray, shark, electric eel.*

During reading

2. What makes Zed and Daniel change their views of each other?
2. *Daniel realises that Zed is actually a decent and kind person who is concerned to prevent Ulric from succeeding in his evil plans. Zed, on the other hand, realises that Daniel is not a member of Ulric's gang. He is in fact kind hearted and has been concerned to protect Madame Hoblidaya. He also rescued the animals that would otherwise have died in the fire set by Ulric and his gang.*

Post-reading

3. Who is the "her" Daniel refers to on the first page of this chapter? Why is Daniel so protective of "her"?
3. *The "her" is Madame Hoblidaya. Daniel knows that Ulric could harm her again and so he wants to protect her.*
4. Zed is knocked into the portapool.
 - a) What creatures are in the portapool?

- b) Why, in your view, is Zed still alive after having been shocked by so many electric eels?
4. a) *There are electric eels in the portapool.*
 b) *Personal response. A possible suggestion is that he is a superhero and so cannot be harmed by the eels.*
5. What does Zed realise about where the real danger lies?
5. *Zed realises Ulric is going to try out his machine on the audience at the talent concert.*
6. a) What is a zombie?
6. a) *Someone who has been robbed of the power to think for himself or herself but moves mechanically and does whatever the person who has robbed him or her commands.*
 b) What do you think a zombie machine could do to people? What does Ulric plan to do?
6. b) *A zombie machine could make people Ulric's slaves. Ulric may be aiming at controlling the world as his final goal.*
7. "Lab" is short for laboratory.

Chapter 12: The boy in the golden suit

During reading

1. What important role does Daniel Dundee play?
1. *Daniel Dundee is able to fight off the attempts by the two boys to stop Zed from entering the hall and taking action against Ulric./ Without him, Zed would not be able to get into the hall and so Ulric would succeed in hypnotising all of the audience.*

Post-reading

2. Why is Zed wearing a golden human cannonball suit?
2. *This is his superhero outfit.*
3. Describe the changes to Zed and how they came about.
3. *Zed is self-confident because he has accepted that he is a superhero and believes that he has his father's support. He has also gained a great deal of confidence through having Daniel Dundee and Madame Hobliday's belief in him. He is able to act masterfully. Even when he can no longer send out electric current, he is able to take action. He is able to jump right down the stairs and to challenge Ulric. He is strong. He is also able to cling successfully to the underside of a helicopter. Accept other valid points that learners make.*
4. Why did Daniel Dundee not fall under Ulric's spell as many of the others did?
4. *His mind works in a different way from all the other people who fell under the spell.*
5. Zed sees his reflection in the copper plaque and realises that he does not look like a super hero. This does not stop him from dashing to save the people in the hall. What does this tell us about him?
5. *He shows that he accepts his shortcomings. He is on a mission and he is determined to rescue people from Ulric's evil scheme regardless of the obstacles. He is a brave person.*
6. Zed makes a globe-like circle in the air with his fingertips when Ulric starts to open his brief case.
- a) Why does he do this?
- b) What happens to everything with a frequency?
- c) Why does Ulric quickly rip out the wires from his machine and leave the hall?
- a) *He is filling the air with the electric power that is within him.*
 b) *They burst into flames or fall apart.*
 c) *He realises that his plan will not succeed and he wants to escape taking his machine with him as quickly as possible.*
7. Why do the two boys end up fighting on the skis of a helicopter high above the ocean?
7. *Ulric decides that in the style of true supervillain and superhero conflict they have to have a dramatic and dangerous fight. This means it has to be in the air and not on the ground.*
8. Where do you think Ulric disappears to?

8. *Answers should relate to an evil place.*

Epilogue: The end of the beginning

Pre-reading

1. What does the title "The end of the beginning" suggest?

1. *This suggests that Zed is going to become a fully-fledged hero. This is the story of how he became a superhero. He will now have many adventures.*

During reading

2. What is the most frightening thing that Zed faces on his lone helicopter ride?

2. *The most frightening thing that he faces is knowing that there is an abyss below him that he will fall into if he lets go.*

Post-reading

1. What does he mean when he asks "Do enemies really die"? Do you think that Ulric is really dead?

1. *He knows from the comics that enemies (supervillains) often seem to be dead but return to fight again.*

2. Zed has many unanswered questions and thoughts going through his head. Which one is the most important to him do you think?

2. *Personal response.*

3. Ulric believes that the world is made up of ones and zeroes?

a) Which of the two is Zed?

b) Which of the two are you? Why?

3. a) *Zed is a zero.*

b) *Personal response.*

4. What do the words "the people he would spend his life protecting" reveal to us about how Zed sees the future?

4. *Zed sees himself as a superhero from now on.*

5. Look at Zed's list of things that he believes in. Which ones do you believe in? Why?

5. *Personal response. The reason must be clear and logical.*

6. What do the words "I am the zero without end" tell us about how Zed intends to live his life?

6. *Zed is always going to be on the side of the weak, those who are easily taken in and those who are easily led.*

7. Is *SuperZero* a good title for both Zed and the novel? Why?

7. *Personal response. The reason given must be clearly stated.*