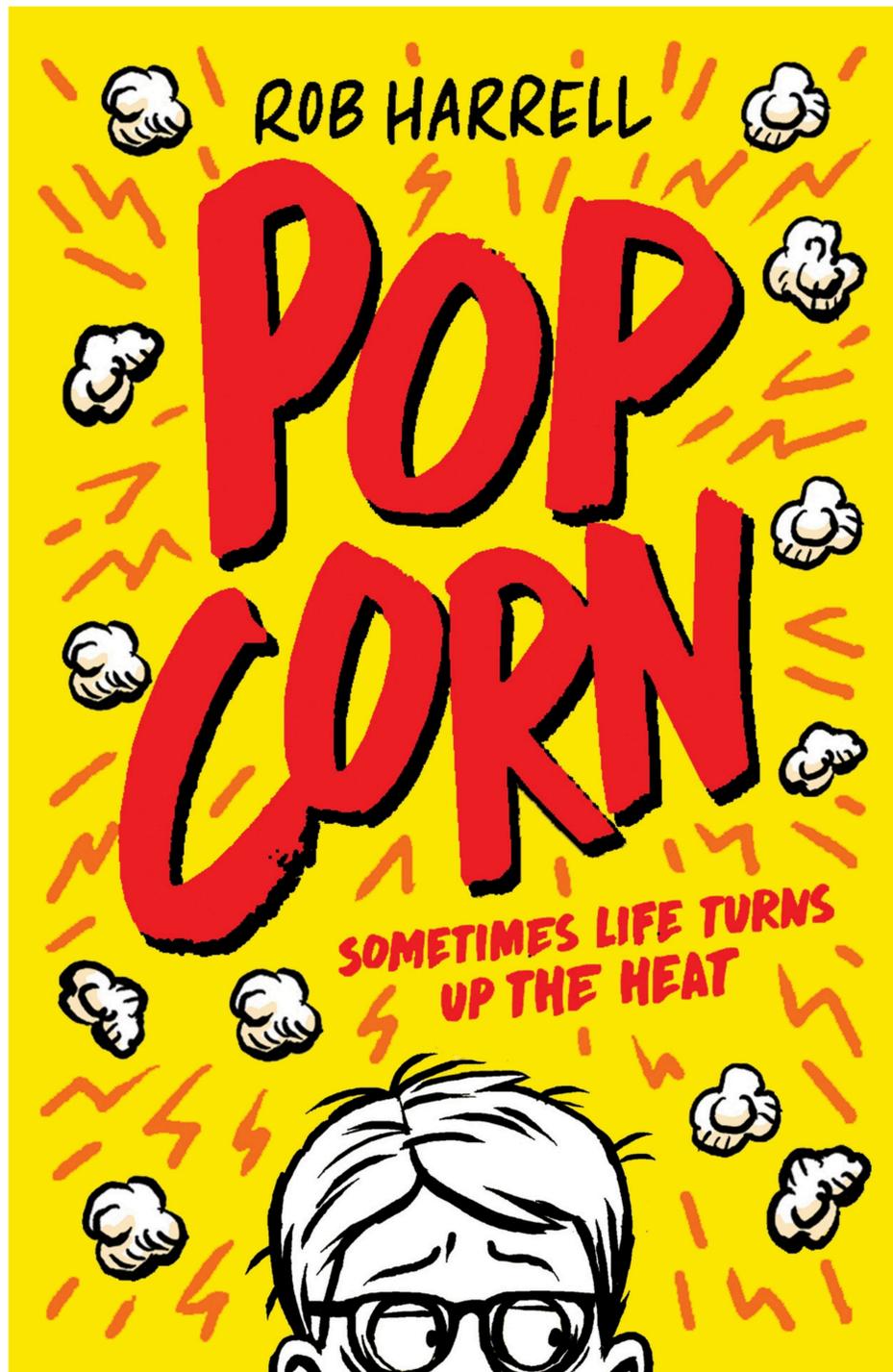


# The Carnegies



## The Carnegie Shortlist 2026 Shadowing Resources



# Popcorn

## Carnegie Medal for Writing

**Author: Rob Harrell**

**Age range: 9+**

### Description:

Andrew is determined that school photograph day will go well. Anxiety is a real concern for him though. There's a wonderful hopeful tone throughout the novel alongside a sympathetic and authentic representation of panic attacks. Accessible and affecting throughout, this is a romp of read set across a single day. Emotion and humour are expertly balanced.

Themes:

- Anxiety
- Panic attack
- Humour
- Emotional honesty
- Friendship
- Bullying

### Shadowing Ideas:

1. Draw your own mini comic like Andrew's Anxiety Files featuring at least 4 panels or boxes, and yourself as the main character.
2. Andrew uses popcorn popping as a simile for how he feels when he is anxious. Write a collaborative or acrostic poem using different similes for different emotions.
3. Create a year book photo collection of your shadowing group. You could create two; one consisting of the perfect photographs and one reflecting a messier reality.

## For Students

### About these Resources

All of these resources are designed to be completed in small discussion groups, ideally your school's Carnegie Medal for Writing Shadowing Group. However, they can easily be done individually. Instead of talking about the tasks, you can write down and keep a record of your ideas.

### Before Reading

- Discuss what you think *Popcorn* will be about based on these extracts. You should structure your discussion around the questions below.
  - What do you think will happen?
  - What other novels do you think it will be like?
  - What genre of novel do you think it will belong to?
  - What sense do you get of where and when it will be set?
  - If you had to identify three likely themes, what would they be?

Spend 10-20 minutes on these activities.

1. Danny is all apologies. 'OMG! I'm so sorry! That came out so fast I ... I didn't have a chance! Did I spray you?'

I can't help it. This kind of thing – germs, etc. – freaks me out. I think Covid-times made it worse, but it's part of me now.

2. That said, we're different. Quite a bit different. I mean, for starters, she's a girl and I'm a guy. I'm annoyingly tall and she's tiny. She's a natural athlete and I'm ... not a natural athlete.

3. She walked to the pot by the stove where she kept the utensils. She grabbed her metal spatula and waved it at me. 'This, ya ding-dong. You know what I needed.'

Then she just stood there, looking at the spatula in her hand for a while. She chuckled and looked at me. 'Why can't I come up with the name for this?'

4. 'Good luck, Mom, I know you're gonna slay.' She's been playing that song where Beyonce singles about slaying on a loop for a couple of days. Psyching herself up.

She sips her coffee. 'Thank you. I intend to slay. But don't worry about me, okay? I mean it. Just focus on having a good day and try not to mess up your shirt ...'

5. I know it sounds like I'm just throwing out a laundry list of things going wrong, but it's beyond crazy. If my body had a control panel, every single warning light would be lit up and flashing. Alarms and sirens would be sounding.

## During Reading

Warning: Don't read the questions before reading each section.

Read up to the page number listed and then answer the questions. You will probably need to spend about 5-10 minutes answering each set of questions.

*The page numbers are based on the Piccadilly Press edition of the book, first published in the UK in 2024.*

### Read chapters 1 and 1.5

- What are your first impressions of Andrew? What kind of narrator do you think he'll be?
- What do you think will be the novel's main focus, based on what you've read so far? How does this fit with the predictions you made before you started reading?

### Read chapter 2

- Andrew suffers from anxiety. How does his anxiety affect his behaviour? How do you think it will be presented in the novel as a whole?

### Read chapters 3 and 4

- What picture of school life is being developed? How does it compare to your experience of school life, and of school life in the UK in general?

### Read chapters 5, 6 and 7

- What's the state of Andrew's shirt at this point? What are your predictions about it for the rest of the novel?
- How does Andrew fit in with other students and teachers? What do you think school life is generally like for him?
- How does Andrew use the image of a popcorn kernel to describe his panic attacks? How effective is this? How does this image shape your understanding of the book's title?

### Read chapter 7.5

- Why does Andrew have a sketchbook? How do his sketches add to your experience of reading Popcorn?

### Read chapters 8, 9, 10 and 10.5

- How do Andrew and Jonesy get on? What do you think about Andrew's attitude to Jonesy's other friends?
- Why did Mika call Andrew at school? Was she right to do this?
- What are your thoughts about Andrew's living conditions at home? How does this contribute to your understanding of his anxiety and his general approach to life?

### **Read chapters 11, 12 and 12.5**

- What do you think about Andrew's behaviour towards Jonesy when he gets cross? What about Jonesy's response to him?
- How do details of Andrew's Dad add to your understanding of what he's like and how he feels?

### **Read chapters 13 and 14**

- Gene laughs at what happens to Andrew. Do you find it funny as a reader? What tone do you think the book is written in? How much is this to do with the fact that Andrew is the narrator? How would this book be different if it was written in the third person?

### **Read chapters 15 and 16**

- What do you think about the decision by the police that Andrew should stay at school, rather than leave and help look for G?
- How does the book present Andrew's panic attack? What are your thoughts about this? What about Mr Kellerman's response?

### **Read chapters 17, 18, 19, 20 and 21, plus the Author's Note**

- What are your thoughts about Andrew 'shark bopping' Gene? Why does Jonesy call it a shark bop?
- What are your thoughts about the story's ending, particularly the changes in Andrew's character?
- How does the author's note add to your understanding of the novel?

## After Reading

### Initial thoughts

Spend 10-15 minutes discussing the questions below.

- What are your overall impressions of this novel?
- Which moments stick most in your memory and why?
- Which characters do you like best and why?
- Which other novels does it remind you of and why?
- How gripping did you find the story?
- What are your thoughts about how the book was written?
- Based on reading *Popcorn*, how likely are you to read other novels by Rob Harrell?

### What's *Popcorn* about?

- Spend one or two minutes writing down a single sentence that begins: '*Popcorn* is about ...'
- If you are working in a group, share your different sentences and discuss.
- Next read the sentences below that give further ideas about what the novel is about.
- If you are working in a group, spend 5-10 minutes ordering the sentences, from the one you agree with most to the one you agree with least.
- Finally, decide on the statement you agree with most. It can be one from the list or your own. Write down a few ideas about how *Popcorn* relates to your chosen statement.

### *Popcorn* is about ...

- Standing up to bullies
- Understanding how others think and feel
- The value of talking things through
- The madness of school life
- The importance of friendship
- Coping with anxiety
- Coping with different stages of life, all the way from childhood to old age
- Being sympathetic to those who find life hard
- Accepting who you are
- Recognising that you can change your behaviour.

## Exploring the Novel Further

### Other characters

The novel is told in the voice of Andrew, who is also the main character. There are several other characters who play a significant role in the novel.

- Write two or three sentences in the voices of three or four of these characters, expressing their thoughts and feelings about Andrew.
  - Jonesy
  - Gene
  - Susan Yaeger (Andrew's Mum)
  - Mr Kellerman
  - Dr Cain
  - Tyler Harris
  - Mr Espinosa (the headteacher)

Spend 15-20 minutes on this activity.

## Exploring *Popcorn*

### A letter to the author

- Write a letter or email to Rob Harrell expressing your thoughts about how he has written about anxiety. You should take the chance to ask him any questions that you might have.

Spend 20-30 minutes on this activity.

### Serious or comical?

- *Popcorn* gives the reader a serious look at what it's like to live with anxiety, wrapped up in a comic voice. Write down your thoughts about how successfully you think the novel combines the serious and the comic. You might like to think about:
  - How the serious parts of the novel are presented
  - How the novel's humour is presented
  - How successfully the two are combined
  - The kind of novel you think Rob Harrell has written overall.

Spend 20-30 minutes on this activity.

## Reading the reviews

The extracts, below, are all from reviews of *Popcorn*.

- Read all the reviews and discuss which comes closest to your own view of the book.
- Working individually, write your own paragraph expressing your views.
- If possible, share your reviews with others.

You can submit your reviews to the Carnegie Shadowing Scheme website. This can be accessed at:

[carnegies.co.uk/writing-shortlist-2026/](http://carnegies.co.uk/writing-shortlist-2026/)

Give yourself 30-60 minutes to complete this activity.

### A.

Huge congratulations to Rob Harrell for writing this funny, tender, informative and brave book that shows young people that, no matter what you might think, you are not alone and you can get past terrible mental health problems such as anxiety.

### B.

It's so difficult to be funny and serious all at the same time, but somehow Rob Harrell pulls it off in *Popcorn*. Narrator Andrew's voice is infused with charm and wit, as he faces up to his crippling anxiety and the various problems faced by his family. The things that happen to him at school, including bullying, are very difficult, but he shows that by using humour you can learn to move beyond them.

### C.

I absolutely loved the combination of words and images. The story alone was funny and made me want to keep reading, but the images really gave the book something extra special. Reading it, I always looked forward to the next illustration, where I could catch my breath and think about what it must be like to be Andrew.

### D.

For me *Popcorn* tried that little bit too hard. A kid with anxiety. A grandma with Alzheimer's who goes missing. A mother with money problems. An absent father. It read like a tick-box of important issues that young people need to learn to face up to. Yes, I liked some of the humour and the illustrations, but these got obscured by THE SERIOUS STUFF.

## Writing Activities

On your own, or with a partner, complete one or more of these writing activities to help you develop your thoughts about *Popcorn* further.

You will need 30-60 minutes for each activity.

- Write a few paragraphs about your own school day, either real or imagined, in the style of Andrew – complete with sketches.
- Write about a crazy incident at your school, either real or imagined, in a way that's sympathetic to those involved.
- Write a poem based on Andrew's image of a popcorn kernel and his anxiety.