

A Guide to Using *Avenging the Owl* in your Classroom

by author Melissa Hart, M.F.A.

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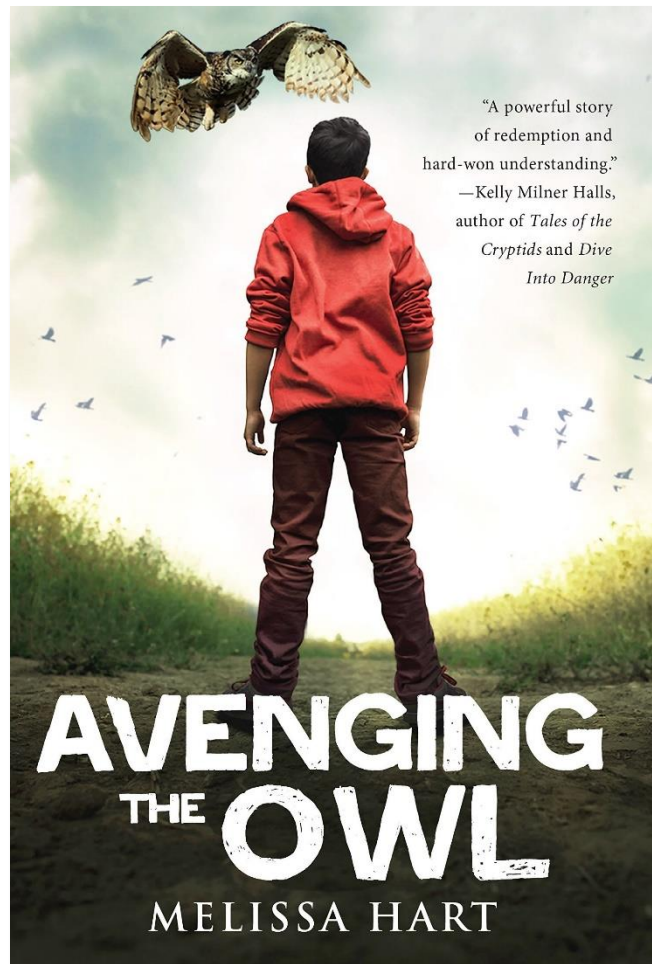


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About the Author of *Avenging the Owl*


Melissa Hart grew up near Los Angeles with a mother who drove a VW bus and a younger brother who has Down syndrome. One of the main characters in her award-winning middle-grade novel *Avenging the Owl* (Sky Pony Press, 2016) is based on her brother. She moved to Oregon 20 years ago; *Avenging* is her love letter to the incredible flora and fauna of the Pacific Northwest.

She's also the author *Better with Books: 500 Diverse Books to Ignite Empathy in Tweens and Teens* (Sasquatch, 2019) and *The Media Adventurer's Handbook: Decoding Persuasion in Everyday News, Ads, and More* (First Second, 2021). She teaches for the MFA in Creative Writing Program at Southern New Hampshire University.

Melissa lives in Oregon with her photographer husband and their 13-year-old daughter, plus a flock of chickens, three cats, a rabbit, and one very patient terrier. She loves to hike and run long-distance, and kayak and bike. When she's thoroughly exhausted herself, she likes to read, go to movies, experiment with vegetarian cooking, get muddy in the garden, and hang out with friends and family. Website: www.melissahart.com



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 Melissa Hart with her writing studio supervisor, Jake.



Section One—Chapters 1-4

Quiz, Section One

Answer each question to the best of your abilities, to test your comprehension of Section One of *Avenging the Owl*.

1. Where does Solo keep his spare quarters and dimes? _____

2. What two things does Solo have to do for the owl, Hermes? _____

3. What activity causes Artemis, the Great horned owl, to be moody? _____

4. What outfit does Solo's dad wear in Oregon? _____

5. What is Voluntary Simplicity, according to Solo's mother? _____

6. What does Mom give Solo to put on his waffles, and why? _____

Section One—Chapters 1-4

Like Your Life

In Section One of *Avenging the Owl*, Solo’s parents drop him into a new life, far from the people and things that he loves. A judge in juvenile court assigns him to weeks of community service at a raptor rehabilitation center, taking care of injured and orphaned birds of prey. Solo is horrified to realize he’ll have to interact up close and personal with his sworn enemies . . . owls. Answer the questions below to explore his fears, and yours.

1. Solo is terrified of owls’ extremely sharp beaks and talons. What object, activity, or animal are you afraid of because you don’t want to get hurt?

2. Solo’s parents make him move from his beloved California home to a trailer in the middle of Oregon. Describe a time your parents made you do something you didn’t want to do. How did you feel? What did you learn from the experience?

3. Solo agrees to go fishing with Eric, but he doesn’t want to be his friend. Describe a time you had to hang out with someone you didn’t know, and weren’t sure you liked. How did you feel? What did you learn from the experience?

A Fun Project!

Solo's mother hands him a jar of spiced apples to put on his waffles. Spiced apples are easy to make, and they're delicious on waffles, pancakes, ice cream, and toast. Here's a recipe like the one Solo's mother uses, below. Make a batch for a gift—they last five days refrigerated.

Mom's Spiced Apples

Gather together your ingredients.

2 teaspoons of cinnamon

1/8 teaspoon of nutmeg

1/3 cup of white sugar

4 Granny Smith apples

1/2 cup of brown sugar, packed

1 Tablespoon of cornstarch

1/4 cup of butter

Wash or peel and slice apples. One-half-inch slices are ideal.

Mix cinnamon, sugar, butter, and nutmeg in a medium-sized saucepan and bring to a simmer. Whisk in cornstarch and keep stirring until lumps have disappeared.

Add apples to saucepan and stir until all slices are coated. Simmer on low until apples are tender. You may need to add a little water.

Cool and serve, or pack into small jars and refrigerate for up to five days.



Section One—Chapters 1-4

Study Connection—Mythology

In Section One of *Avenging the Owl*, Solo arrives at the raptor center and learns that several of the birds have mythological names. So does Minerva, the woman who runs the center. Research the names below and describe who each person is in Greek or Roman mythology.

1. **Minerva** _____

2. **Cyclops** _____

3. **Hephaestus** _____

4. **Hermes** _____

5. **Artemis** _____

Section Two—Chapters 5-8

Quiz, Section Two

Answer each question to the best of your abilities, to test your comprehension of Section Two of *Avenging the Owl*.

1. What does Solo know about Down syndrome when he meets Eric? _____

2. What subject is Sergeant Bird Nerd focusing on in college? _____

3. List three reasons Mom starts crying when The Big Grape breaks down. _____

4. What does Solo load into the raptor center's deep freezer, and why? _____

5. Who used to own the bike that Lucas gives Solo? _____

6. Why can't Minerva let Artemis fly free in the forest? _____

Section Two—Chapters 5-8

Like Your Life

In Section Two of *Avenging the Owl*, Solo makes a life-changing mistake. He also meets Sergeant Bird Nerd, discovers the freedom of riding a bicycle, and learns that his best friend is hanging out with a new boy. Answer the questions to explore his emotions, and yours.

1. Solo says that putting labels on people lets you know where to “file things in your head so you can stay organized.” He says he’s labeled “the bad kid.” What label would you put on yourself? Why?

2. Sergeant Bird Nerd gives Solo a bicycle and a new sense of freedom. Describe a time that you felt particularly free. What were you doing? How did you feel?

3. Solo’s best friend Rajen writes to say that he’s been hanging out with a new surfer. Solo is devastated. Describe a conflict you had with one of your friends. What happened? What did you learn from the conflict?

Section Two—Chapters 5-8

A Fun Project!

Sergeant Bird Nerd orders Solo to water Minerva’s butterfly garden. It’s easy to plant your own butterfly garden, to attract these important—and beautiful—pollinators. Follow the steps below.

1. Find a patch of land at least two feet by two feet, in your front yard or back yard, or even in an unused piece of land in a meridian or local park. Make sure it gets at least partial sun.
2. Dig up the soil. You may need to flood it with water and let it sit over night to loosen it.
3. Add a couple of buckets of compost, available at nurseries and hardware stores. Mix it in with the dirt. (You’ll need more compost if you opt for a bigger garden.)
4. Research which butterflies are attracted to your region, and what types of flowers they prefer. As well, research which of these flowers grows best in full sun or part shade, depending on where your butterfly garden is located.
5. Purchase flower seeds, and/or “starts” (small plants) from a nursery. (Many hardware and grocery stores sell these, as well.)
6. Plant your seeds and/or starts. Water carefully, so as not to hurt fragile roots.
7. Water regularly, so that the soil remains damp, but not soaking wet, and watch as the butterflies flock to your very own garden!



Study Connection—Biology

In Section Two of *Avenging the Owl*, Solo learns that owls swallow their prey whole, and then cough up a pellet full of sharp bones on the inside, and soft fur and feathers on the outside. Research the fascinating ways the animals and insects below eat, and describe.

1. **Vampire Finches** _____

2. **Sea Stars** _____

3. **Dracula Ants** _____

4. **Frogfish** _____

5. **Carrion Beetles** _____

Section Three—Chapters 9-12

Quiz, Section Three

Answer each question to the best of your abilities, to test your comprehension of Section Three of *Avenging the Owl*.

1. What is a “nictitating membrane,” and how does it help an owl? _____

2. According to Minerva, why is an electrocuted bird almost always doomed? _____

3. Why does Solo feel like a butte on the day he goes hiking with Eric and Mrs. Miller? _____

4. List three things Rajen tells Solo about the new kid who moves into his beach house.

5. What plant makes good toilet paper, according to Mrs. Miller?

6. What does Eric say about the relationship between birds and plum trees? _____

Section Three—Chapters 9-12

Like Your Life

In Section Three of *Avenging the Owl*, Solo goes hiking with Eric, and comes home to find that his father has disappeared. He meets a new volunteer at the raptor center and helps with an owl. He also learns something about Eric that surprises him. Answer the questions below.

1. Solo hikes to the top of a butte, and he's struck by its beauty and peace. What particular place do you love? How do you feel when you're there?

2. Solo has to face his fears when Lucas asks him to help with an injured owl. Describe a time you faced one of your fears. How did you feel in the midst of the experience? What did you learn about yourself, and about the thing you feared?

3. In an arcade, Eric stands up to a bully in a way that both surprises Solo and fills him with admiration. Describe a time that one of your friends did something that surprised you. How did you feel? What did you learn about your friend?

A Fun Project!

Dye Your Hair with Jell-O

Eric and Solo dye their hair with Jell-O. It's safe and chemical free, and the color lasts one to two weeks, depending on how often you wash your hair.

(Note that Jell-O dye doesn't show up as vividly on dark hair. You might want to dye dark hair with hair chalk, instead.)

Here's how to do it:

First, get together these items:



- One or two boxes of Jell-O, any flavor
- A shower cap
- Conditioner for your hair
- A towel (preferably, an old one)
- One bowl per color
- Latex or vinyl gloves
- Petroleum jelly, like Vaseline

First, smooth petroleum jelly around your neck, ears, and forehead so that you don't stain them with the Jell-O. Then, cover your clothing with the old towel.

Put on gloves and pour Jell-O powder into a bowl. Mix in enough hair conditioning so that you create a thick paste.

Divide your hair into four sections. Apply the Jell-O paste onto the first section of hair, and then pin it up if it's long. Repeat with the other three sections.

Cover your hair with a shower cap and wait one hour. Then, rinse your hair with lukewarm water and comb. Feel free to blow dry your hair, or let it air dry. Admire your new color!

Section Three—Chapters 9-12

Study Connection—Botany

Botany is the study of plants. In Section Three of *Avenging the Owl*, Solo goes on a hike with Eric and his mother. He discovers plants and trees flowers that he’s never seen before, along with how they’re used for everything from toilet paper to stuffing mattresses. Research five of the plants and flowers in your region. Describe how people use them for food, medicine, etc.

#1 _____

#2. _____

#3. _____

#4. _____

#5. _____

Section Four—Chapters 13-16

Quiz, Section Four

Answer each question to the best of your abilities, to test your comprehension of Section Four of *Avenging the Owl*.

1. What does Eric drop into Solo's hand right after he meets Leah? _____

2. What happened to the bare hill on the side of the road to the coast? _____

3. Name three things Mrs. Miller has packed in Eric's lunch bag. _____

4. What is Minerva wearing when she walks outside with a flashlight? _____

5. What two items does Solo buy at the market? _____

6. Why doesn't Solo want to leave Oregon, after all? _____

Section Four—Chapters 13-16

Like Your Life

In Section Four of *Avenging the Owl*, Solo and his friends release an owl on the Oregon coast. Then, Solo discovers that his father's returned and plans to move the family back to California. Solo decides to run away, and Eric follows him. Answer the questions below.

1. For months, Solo has despised owls. But now, releasing a rehabilitated owl on the coast, he finds that he no longer loathes them. Describe a time you realized you no longer disliked something or someone. What did you learn from the experience?

2. Solo jumps into the ocean, and he feels like it's welcoming him back. What aspect of the natural world feels particularly welcoming to you—Water? Forest? Desert? Sky?—and why? Describe how you feel when you're in this element.

3. Solo and Eric decide to run away from their parents, and quickly realize they've made a bad decision. Describe a time that you made an unskillful choice. How did you feel? What did you learn from the experience?

A Fun Project!

Bliss Collage

Solo notices Minerva's bumper sticker, which reads "Follow Your Bliss." The mythologist Joseph Campbell said this phrase often, explaining that when we follow what makes us happy, what interests and excites us, we'll live a fulfilling life.

Gather together old magazines and print ads. Grab a big piece of paper, some scissors, and a tube of paste or glue. Then, create a Bliss Collage to post in your room as a reminder of what makes you happy!

As you contemplate what images to include, consider the answers to these questions:

1. What activity would you rather do than anything else in the world?
2. What person or people would you most like to hang out with?
3. What animal, bird, or reptile would you most like to hang out with?
4. What surroundings make you happiest? Your bedroom? The beach? Your dance studio? The soccer field? The mountains?
5. What fascinates you—pulls you out of yourself and makes you forget where you are and what time it is?
6. What job might you like to devote yourself to as an adult—a job that would get you excited to go to work each day?



Section Four—Chapters 13-16

Study Connection—Writing

In Section Four of *Avenging the Owl*, Solo scribbles down a film scene in his notebook while Lucas is driving him and Leah and Eric to the coast with the great-horned owl. Using the screenplay format from the novel, create a scene below to describe an interaction between two people or animals. Include plenty of surprising details, as well as tension between your two characters, to keep people interested in your scene.

FADE IN

Section Five—Chapters 17-19

Quiz, Section Five

Answer each question to the best of your abilities, to test your comprehension of Section Five of *Avenging the Owl*.

1. What is the name of the meteor shower that Solo and Eric see from on top of the butte?

2. Describe the gift that Leah gives Solo at the end of the novel _____

3. Name two things Solo thinks police could arrest him for on the night he runs away. _____

4. What snack does Mom give Solo in The Big Grape? _____

5. What does Eric tell his parents about his injured arm? _____

6. What does Solo teach Eric to do for Artemis? _____

Section Five—Chapters 17-19

Like Your Life

In Section Five of *Avenging the Owl*, Solo’s father discovers him and Eric. They return to the raptor center, and Solo defends Artemis from Eric’s father. Solo’s parents agree to stay in Oregon. They return to the trailer which finally feels like home. Answer the questions below.

1. On the butte at night, Solo thinks about the word “kriya,” which means “spiritual emergency.” Describe a time that your own spirit felt particularly threatened. What put it in danger? What did you learn from the experience?

2. Solo shocks himself by defending a great-horned owl against Eric’s father’s threats. Describe a time you found yourself unexpectedly taking the side of someone or something you thought you didn’t care about. What happened? What did you learn?

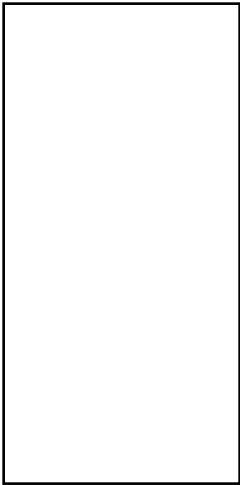
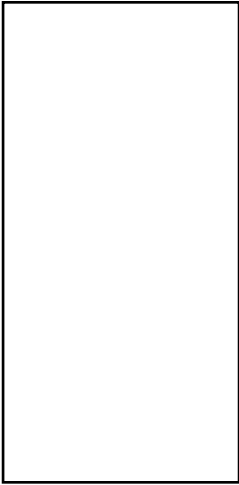
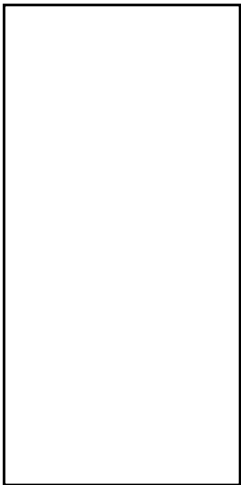
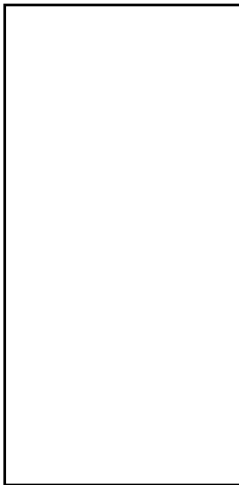
3. At the end of the novel, Solo and his parents return to their trailer, which feels like home. Describe your home. What makes it feel “homey”? What would you change about it if you could, and why?

A Fun Project!

Famous Owl Trading Cards

There are many famous owls in literature and films. Research the owls listed, then use the template to make trading cards. Include a drawing of each owl along with a biography.

1. Hedwig, from *Harry Potter*
2. Soren, from *Guardians of Ga'Hoole*
3. Hoots the Owl from *Sesame Street*
4. Owl from *Winnie the Pooh*
5. Woodsy Owl from U.S. Forest Service
6. Archimedes from *Sword in the Stone*

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Study Connection—Health

In Section Five of *Avenging the Owl*, Solo does his best to help Eric with his wounds from the great horned owl by making a sling. Wilderness medicine is useful to know if you're out hiking without easy access to a doctor. Research and describe how you'd treat each injury below if you're far away from medical care.

1. **Sprained ankle** _____

2. **Cut or abrasion** _____

3. **Bump on the head** _____

4. **Blisters** _____

5. **Bonus!** List 6 items you should have in a first aid kit when you're out in the wilderness.

After You've Finished *Avenging the Owl* . . .

Research Suggestions Related to *Avenging the Owl*

Below, please find a list of topics related to *Avenging the Owl* that you might want to research further. The back of the novel includes further reading about owls, and about people with Down syndrome.

- Raptor rehabilitation centers in your area
- Special Olympics volunteer opportunities
- Great-horned owls
- Japanese internment during World War II
- Treatments for clinical depression
- How to write a screenplay
- How to fix a flat bicycle tire
- Wilderness medicine
- How to write a screenplay
- Best surfing breaks in the world
- Mythologist Joseph Campbell and his friendship with *Star Wars* creator George Lucas
- Celebrities who have Down syndrome
- Wonders of the Oregon Coast



Avenging the Owl Picnic

When Leah pulls out a bag of cookies in Sergeant Bird Nerd's truck on the way to the Oregon coast, Solo is thrilled. Host a picnic, using some of the food and drinks mentioned in *Avenging the Owl*. Really, the tofu recipe is delicious!

Leah's Chocolate Chip Oatmeal Cookies

Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Line two cookie sheets with parchment paper, and gather together these ingredients:

1 cup of butter, softened	1 cup light brown sugar, packed
½ cup white sugar	2 eggs
2 teaspoons vanilla	1 cup white flour
½ cup whole wheat flour	½ teaspoon baking soda
½ teaspoon salt	1 cup chocolate chips

In a bowl, cream together the butter, brown sugar, and white sugar until smooth—about five minutes. Beat in eggs one at a time, then stir in vanilla.

Combine the flour, baking soda, and salt. Stir into the creamed mixture until just blended. Mix in the oats and chocolate chips. Don't overmix, your cookies will be tough. Drop by heaping spoonful onto baking sheets.

Bake for 14 minutes in the preheated oven. Allow cookies to cool on baking sheet for 5 minutes. Transfer to a wire rack to cool thoroughly.

Avenging the Owl Picnic (cont.)

Mrs. Miller's Peanut Butter & Banana Sandwiches

Gather together these ingredients:

2 slices of whole wheat bread	1 ripe banana, sliced
2 Tablespoons of peanut butter	1 Tablespoon of butter
(or nut-free butter)	

Heat butter in pan over medium high heat. Spread peanut butter on each slice of bread. When butter is melted, place one slice in pan, peanut butter side up. Arrange sliced bananas on peanut butter, and top with other slice of bread (peanut butter side down). Fry until golden brown and cut into four triangles.

Golden Fried Tofu

Gather together these ingredients:

1 package of firm tofu	2 Tablespoons of honey
1 teaspoon of ground ginger	1 clove of minced garlic
1 Tablespoon of soy sauce	2 Tablespoons of honey
3 Tablespoons of coconut oil	

Wrap tofu in a clean tea towel and place a heavy book on top to drain the water from it. Then, cut it in one inch pieces. Mix soy sauce, ginger, honey, and garlic in a 9" x 13" pan and place tofu in the marinade. Let sit for at least five minutes, and then turn tofu over for another five minutes.

Heat coconut oil in frying pan over medium high heat until a drop of water sizzles. Place tofu slices in pan and fry until golden brown on both sides. Drain on paper towels and serve with soy sauce, hot sauce, or peanut sauce.

Owl Pellet Cookies

Here's a deliciously-weird recipe from Jane Hammerslough's super-fun, super-science book, *Owl Puke*.

Servings: 36 to 45 cookies

Gather together these ingredients:

6 cups crispy rice cereal

2 cups semisweet or milk chocolate chips

1 cup sugar

1 cup corn syrup

1 cup peanut butter

2 white chocolate candy bar, chopped into bonelike bits

Foil for wrapping pellets



Directions

1. Mix cereal and chocolate chips in a large bowl. Set aside.
2. Mix sugar and corn syrup in a small pan and heat until bubbling.
3. Remove sugar-syrup mixture from heat and stir in peanut butter.
4. Stir peanut butter mixture into cereal and chocolate chips and mix together well. The chocolate chips will melt. When the cereal is coated, allow the mixture to cool.
5. Put 2 tablespoons of the mixture into your hand. Sprinkle 4 to 5 white chocolate bone and skull pieces on top.
6. Squeeze mixture in your fist until it looks like an owl pellet. Wrap, if you'd like, in a small square of foil.

Write to an Author

Authors love to receive mail! You can email them or send them “snail mail.” In your letter, you might add the following:

- Your age and grade
- Your city and state
- How you came across their book in the first place?
- What you liked best about the book—a favorite line, scene, character, image, fact, etc.
- What you didn’t like about the book (it’s okay—authors are tough)
- Any questions you have about the book

Once you’re finished with your letter, you need to figure out where to send it. Many authors have a website with a “contact” page that allows you to either paste your letter into a form, or provides you with an email address.

If you’d prefer to send your letter snail mail, you can see if the author has provided a mailing address on their website. Otherwise, you can look up the publisher’s address and send your letter there.

You’ll want to mark the front of the envelope like this (c/o means “care of”):

Author’s Name
c/o Sky Pony Publishing
Address



Bonus: If you include a return address, the author may even write back to you!

Cool Activities

Dissect an Owl Pellet

Curious about what the owls at the raptor center are coughing up in their pellets? Your parents can help you purchase and dissect a pellet of your own!



[Here's a trusted website](#) from which you can buy owl pellets.

You might also want to check out [Jane Hammerslough's excellent book](#) about owls and pellets. It's called *Owl Puke!*

Participate in National Novel Writing Month!

NaNoWriMo, or National Novel Writing Month, takes place every April, July, and November. Young Writers' NaNoWriMo provides kid writers of any age with free online support to help you write a novel, short story, screenplay, fan fiction, or anything else you can think of!



Find out more about Young Writers' NaNoWriMo [right here!](#)

Interested in publishing your writing? These magazines love to receive writing from young people. Click the links provided to read about what they want!

[New Moon for Girls Magazine](#)

[Skipping Stones Magazine](#)

[Stone Soup Magazine](#)

[Teen Ink Magazine](#)