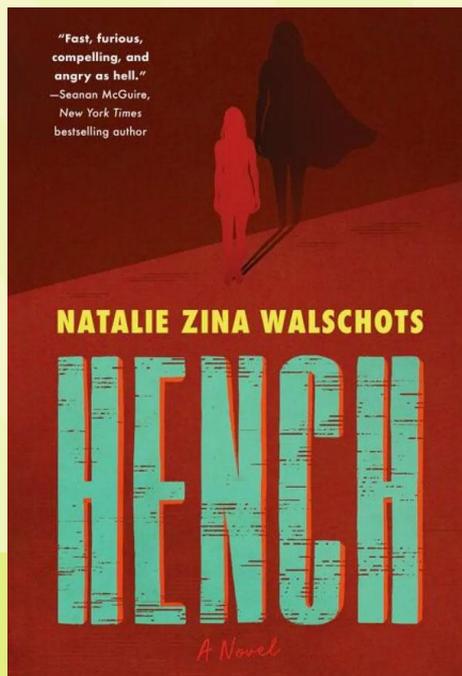


Book backgrounder: **Hench**



Hench is the story of a woman who pays the bills by doing administrative work for villains. But then an incident involving the world's most popular superhero leaves her injured and gets her fired. She ends up realizing what happened to her isn't unique — and she might have the means to take down the so-called hero who hurt her. How? With every office worker's secret weapon: data.

Note to teachers:

This document contains spoilers!

*If you intend to read only the book excerpt provided on **Curio.ca** with your students, this document gives a fuller picture of the book content.*

*If you intend to read the whole book with your students, you may wish to remove spoilers before sharing the document with students. (You can find a PowerPoint version of this document on **Curio.ca**)*



Visit www.curio.ca/canadareads to read an excerpt from *Hench* and watch Natalie Zina Walschots discuss her book.



Book backgrounder: **Hench**

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Critical Thinking Questions / Inquiry Activities: Written by Jason Himsl
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Book backgrounder: **Hench**

Book Description

Anna Tromedlov is a low-level henchperson who makes a living doing admin work for supervillains. While working for a mid-tier villain who's trying to make a name for himself, she suffers a life-altering injury at the hands of Supercollider — the world's most powerful hero.

The next few months of her life become increasingly difficult as she struggles to recover from the trauma and damage done to her body, loses her job and apartment and fights with her insurance company.

Her experience makes her wonder how many people like her had been caught in the hero/villain crossfire.

LITERACY STRATEGY

If you are using this backgrounder directly with students, have them review the document for new vocabulary. They can highlight new words and research their meaning.



Unable to walk while she recovers, Anna's 'downtime' allows her to do what she does best — research obsessively. She uncovers a secret that no one else knows — or at least no one is willing to admit — the heroes aren't so super after all.

It turns out that in the course of doing their 'heroing' the so-called do-gooders actually cause more property and collateral damage than earthquakes, mega storms and floods combined.

Book background: **Hench**

With no one besides her friends June and Greg to tell about her findings, Anna publishes them on a blog to mixed reception. A mysterious invitation, which she accepts because she has nothing to lose, leads to Anna meeting the reclusive supervillain Leviathan — Supercollider's arch-nemesis.

He proposes a plan to take her research to the next level and weaponize the things she's learned against the heroes with the ultimate goal of bringing down Supercollider.

With a team behind her and the resources to execute her plans at the highest level, she pulls off small jobs that prove her concept can actually take these heroes down without throwing a punch. As time passes, Anna earns Leviathan's trust and respect and slowly comes

to live up to the new name they've been calling her — The Auditor.

Her effectiveness and growing reputation in the world of villainy cause Supercollider's team to abduct and torture her. Moments before being lobotomized to render her less of a threat to the heroes, Leviathan bursts in and rescues her.

Leviathan takes Anna's abduction as a call to an all-out war with Supercollider. When the two do battle, Leviathan appears to have the upper hand until he is overpowered and seemingly killed by Supercollider, leaving behind only his mechanical armour.

As Leviathan's second-in-command, the responsibility to rebuild the organization falls on Anna's shoulders.

Book background: **Hench**

While everyone has come to accept that Leviathan is gone, Anna just can't bring herself to believe it.

Leaning more into her villain identity as The Auditor, Anna sets her sights on finally taking Supercollider down once and for all. She starts a calculated campaign to weaken his support, which eventually leads to her teaming up with Quantum Entanglement, Supercollider's crime fighting partner and lover.

Anna knows this uneasy alliance is crucial because Quantum Entanglement just may be the only person alive powerful enough to defeat Supercollider in a fight.

Together they slowly chip away at Supercollider's reputation causing him to set his sights directly on Anna.

The Auditor uses herself as bait to draw Supercollider out in the open and Quantum Entanglement uses her powers to fold his body into itself.

Now a grotesque mass of breathing flesh, The Auditor and Quantum Entanglement take Supercollider to the very same secret lab that Anna was tortured at and discover that she was right all along — Leviathan was alive and being held captive. The armour left behind wasn't real because Leviathan doesn't wear armour — his body is made of living metal.

With Supercollider out of the picture, The Auditor and Leviathan return home with a renewed sense of purpose and are more committed to taking down heroes than ever before.

Book backgrounder: **Hench**



Primary Characters

Anna Tromedlov (Palindrome; The Auditor) – Protagonist. Uses data science and social media as her superpower to get revenge on all the heroes who disregard humanity in accomplishing their goals

Leviathan – An evil genius with gadgets and tech who is one of the most powerful supervillains in the world. Supercollider's arch-nemesis, and Anna's boss.

Supercollider – The perfect man. An invincible, incredibly powerful superhero who broke Anna's leg and led her down the path to villainy.

Quantum Entanglement – A powerful superhero spurned by Supercollider who falls in league with Anna to take the hero down.

Keller – Leviathan's head Meat (human muscle).

June and Greg – Anna's best friends from before she was The Auditor.

Book backgrounder: **Hench**

Key Themes

 **REVENGE** – Revenge is a dish best served cold, and it is the Auditor's cool calculations that ultimately win the day over Leviathan's raging hatred or even Supercollider's incandescent, blinding hatred.

 **PERSEVERANCE** – Anna starts with nothing (starts AS nothing), and using the skills and talents she has, works her way into becoming a full-fledged supervillain in her own right. She never rushes and, in doing so, is more frightening than perhaps anyone.

 **FRIENDSHIP** and **FOUND FAMILY** – Leviathan's team wins because he finally accepts he can't do it

all alone. By letting Anna in and letting her pull people in around her, they accomplish so much more. This is juxtaposed with the damage Anna is able to do in isolating Supercollider.

 **ACCOUNTABILITY** – The superheroes in the world of *Hench* cause unprecedented levels of damage and casualties with impunity. No one has the power or the will to hold the 'good guys' accountable for the lives they ruin in so many different ways. Anna sees this injustice and sets out to correct it by any means necessary.

 **POWER** – The power imbalances in *Hench* are more than just about physical strength. The book is an

Book backgrounder: **Hench**

examination of who holds power and uses Anna's story of reclaiming power and turning it against those who abuse the position they hold as a form of literal and metaphoric empowerment.



About the Author

Natalie Zina Walschots is a freelance writer, community manager and former academic based in Toronto. She writes everything from reviews of science fiction novels and interviews with

heavy metal musicians to in-depth feminist games criticism and pieces of long-form journalism. She is the author of two books of poetry. In her free time she has been exploring the poetic potential of the notes engine in the video game Bloodborne, writing a collection of polyamorous fairytales, developing interactive narrative classes and composing short text-based body horror games. She also plays a lot of D&D, participates in a lot of Nordic Live Action Role Play, watches a lot of horror movies and reads a lot of speculative fiction.



Watch Natalie Zina Walschots discuss her book: www.curio.ca/canadareads

Book backgrounder: **Hench**

Other Books by Natalie Zina Walschots

This is Natalie's debut novel, but she has two books of poetry, *Doom* and *Thumbscrews*.



Notable Quotes from Reviews

"*Hench* is an engrossing take on the superheroic. It's smart and imaginative; an exemplary rise-of-darkness story, one I won't soon forget... I honestly can't wait to see what Natalie Zina Walschots does next with the genre."

– NPR

"Witty and inventive . . . the pleasure of the novel is the slow rollout of the rules. Creating a universe

involves inventing lots of little problems, and the solutions here don't disappoint."

– New York Times

"Walschots playfully pokes at both office politics and comic book absurdity while offering gripping action and gut-wrenching body horror. The inventive premise, accessible heroine, and biting wit will have readers eager for more from this talented author."

– Publishers Weekly (starred review)

"A fiendishly clever novel that fizzes with moxie and malice."

– Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

Book backgrounder: **Hench**



CBC Links

- Canada Reads Book page: [Hench](#)
- Canada Reads Author page: [Natalie Zina Walschots](#)
- [Natalie Zina Walschots wrote a novel about unheroic heroes and relatable villains — now it's on Canada Reads](#)
- [The best Canadian fiction of 2020](#)



Other Links

- ['Hench' Counts The Cost Of Those High-Powered Superhero Battles \(NPR\)](#)

Critical Thinking Questions



Students will need to read the excerpt from *Hench* found at www.curio.ca/canadareads and may need to do some research to help them craft a response.

1. The superhero genre, from comics to television shows to movies, occupies a broad space in popular culture today. How do you account for this huge popularity?
2. In *Hench*, the superheroes carry that label despite causing enormous damage and injuring many people in their exploits. How is a reputation created? What are examples of people whose reputations and behaviour do not match?

Book backgrounder: **Hench**

3. What is a team or group that you've experienced success with? Why did you work so well together?
4. History books in the past often focused on "great man history" and focused on the achievements of leaders and heroes. How does our understanding of history and current events change if we shift our focus instead to the lives of everyday people?
5. The stories you read as a child were often black-and-white tales of good versus evil. An increasingly common character now, though, is the antihero. What is an antihero story that you have enjoyed? What is the appeal of this type of character?
6. Read the excerpt of *Hench* at www.curio.ca/canadareads. How does Natalie Zina Walschots create a sense of tension to engage the reader?
7. Life is very rarely consistently easy; we often have to face adversity and overcome obstacles. What steps do you take when you experience difficulties and challenges?
8. What is the best response when a wrong has been committed? To seek revenge against the offender? To prevent future harm? Or to rehabilitate the person who committed the bad act?

Book backgrounder: **Hench**



Inquiry Activities

1. Students can investigate the causes and effects of persistent underrepresentation of women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) fields. As an extension, students can research and recommend ways to boost women's participation in STEM.
2. Students might research the origin stories of superhero or supervillain characters. Students can then use these ideas as inspiration to create their own superhero or supervillain character.
3. Students can watch video clips about the experiences of civilians in conflict zones.

Video clips can be found on websites such as www.cbc.ca and www.curio.ca. They can continue research into this topic and recommend ways to protect civilians from harm.

4. Students can find examples of stories that are told from the perspective of a minor character. They can extend this activity by rewriting a short passage from the point-of-view of the major character.



Visit www.curio.ca/canadareads to read an excerpt from *Hench* and watch Natalie Zina Walschots discuss her book.