

Name _____ Class _____

Button, Button

Richard Matheson

About this Text

Richard Matheson (1926-2013) was an American author known for his fantasy, horror, and science fiction stories. He wrote 16 episodes of the classic television show *The Twilight Zone*, and seven of his novels and short stories (including this one) have been turned into movies.

Vocabulary

Look up and define the words listed below:

Intrigue [in-**treeg**]

Offensive[uh-**fen**-siv]

For this selection, you will need to know what suspense is. Please review the definition below.

Suspense is a feeling of uncertainty or fear about what will happen next in a story.

Directions: Read the short story and pause at the questions in the text. Respond to the questions in the margins section “During Reading Questions”

DURING READING QUESTIONS

[1] The package was lying by the front door — a cube-shaped carton sealed with tape, their name and address printed by hand: “Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Lewis, 217 E. Thirty-seventh Street, New York, New York 10016.” Norma picked it up, unlocked the door, and went into the apartment. It was just getting dark.

[2] After she put the lamb chops in the broiler, she sat down to open the package.

[3] Inside the carton was a push-button unit fastened to a small wooden box. A glass dome covered the button. Norma tried to lift it off, but it was locked in place. She turned the unit over and saw a folded piece of paper Scotch-taped to the bottom of the box. She pulled it off: “Mr. Steward will call on you at 8:00 P.M.”

[4] Norma put the button unit beside her on the couch. She reread the typed note, smiling.

[5] A few moments later, she went back into the kitchen to make the salad.

[6] The doorbell rang at eight o'clock. “I’ll get it,” Norma called from the kitchen. Arthur was in the living room, reading.

[7] There was a small man in the hallway. He removed his hat as Norma opened the door. “Mrs. Lewis?” he inquired politely.

[8] “Yes?”

[9] “I’m Mr. Steward.”

[10] “Oh, yes.” Norma repressed¹ a smile. She was sure now it was a sales pitch.

[11] “May I come in?” asked Mr. Steward.

[12] “I’m rather busy,” Norma said, “I’ll get you your whatchamacallit, though.” She started to turn.

[13] “Don’t you want to know what it is?”

¹ **Repress** (*verb*): to stop oneself from doing something

[14] Norma turned back. Mr. Steward's tone had been **offensive**. "No, I don't think so," she replied.

[15] "It could prove very valuable," he told her.

[16] "*Monetarily?*" she challenged.

[17] Mr. Steward nodded. "Monetarily," he said.

[18] Norma frowned. She didn't like his attitude. "What are you trying to sell?" she asked.

[19] "I'm not selling anything," he answered.

[20] Arthur came out of the living room. "Something wrong?"

[21] Mr. Steward introduced himself.

[22] "*Oh*, the — " Arthur pointed toward the living room and smiled. "What is that gadget anyway?"

[23] "It won't take long to explain," replied Mr. Steward. "May I come in?"

[24] "If you're selling something—," Arthur said.

[25] Mr. Steward shook his head. "I'm not."

[26] Arthur looked at Norma. "Up to you," she said.

[27] He hesitated. "Well, why not?" he said.

[28] They went into the living room and Mr. Steward sat in Norma's chair. He reached into an inside coat pocket and withdrew a small sealed envelope. "Inside here is a key to the bell-unit dome," he said. He set the envelope on the chair-side table. "The bell is connected to our office."

[29] "What's it for?" asked Arthur.

[30] "If you push the button," Mr. Steward told him, "somewhere in the world someone you don't know will die. In return for which you will receive a payment of \$50,000."

[31] Norma stared at the small man. He was smiling.

[32] "What are you talking about?" Arthur asked him.

[33] Mr. Steward looked surprised. "But I've just explained," he said.

[34] "Is this a practical joke?" asked Arthur.

[35] "Not at all. The offer is completely genuine."²

[36] "You aren't making sense," Arthur said. "You expect us to believe — "

[37] "Whom do you represent?" demanded Norma.

[38] Mr. Steward looked embarrassed. "I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to tell you that," he said. "However, I assure you, the organization is of international scope."³

[39] "I think you'd better leave," Arthur said, standing.

[40] Mr. Steward rose. "Of course."

[41] "And take your button unit with you."

In Paragraphs 8-14

A. **Find Evidence:** Highlight three details that reveal Norma's first reaction to the button box and Mr. Steward. (You can use a highlighter or underline the text.)

B. **Respond:** What is Norma's attitude toward the button box and Mr. Steward when he first arrives?

Paragraphs 15-17

What does Norma's response in paragraph 16 reveal about her character?

² **Genuine** (*adjective*): real or actual

³ reach or size

[42] “Are you sure you wouldn't care to think about it for a day or so?”

[43] Arthur picked up the button unit and the envelope and thrust them into Mr. Steward's hands. He walked into the hall and pulled open the door.

[44] “I'll leave my card,” said Mr. Steward. He placed it on the table by the door.

[45] When he was gone, Arthur tore it in half and tossed the pieces onto the table.

[46] Norma was still sitting on the sofa. “What do you think it was?” she asked.

[47] “I don't care to know,” he answered.

[48] She tried to smile but couldn't. “Aren't you curious at all?”

[49] “No.” He shook his head.

[50] After Arthur returned to his book, Norma went back to the kitchen and finished washing the dishes.

[51] “Why won't you talk about it?” Norma asked.

[52] Arthur's eyes shifted as he brushed his teeth. He looked at his reflection in the bathroom mirror.

[53] “Doesn't it **intrigue** you?”

[54] “It **offends** me,” Arthur said.

[55] “I know, but” — Norma rolled another curler in her hair — “doesn't it **intrigue** you, too?”

[56] “You think it's a practical joke?” she asked as they went into the bedroom.

[57] “If it is, it's a sick one.”

[58] Norma sat on her bed and took off her slippers. “Maybe it's some kind of psychological research.”⁴

[59] Arthur shrugged. “Could be.”

[60] “Maybe some eccentric⁵ millionaire is doing it.”

[61] “Maybe.”

[62] “Wouldn't you like to know?”

[63] Arthur shook his head.

[64] “*Why?*”

[65] “Because it's immoral,” he told her.

[66] Norma slid beneath the covers. “Well, I think it's **intriguing**,” she said.

[67] Arthur turned off the lamp and leaned over to kiss her. “Good night,” he said.

[68] “Good night.” She patted his back.

[69] Norma closed her eyes. Fifty thousand dollars, she thought.

Paragraphs 51-69

A. **Find Evidence:** Highlight three details that reveal Arthur and Norma's different attitudes towards the button. (You can use a highlighter or underline in the text)

B. **Write:** How do Norma and Arthur's attitudes towards the button unit impact the reader? How do the attitudes make the reader feel?

⁴ Psychological research refers to scientific studies of human behaviors, sometimes involving presenting people with a strange situation and seeing how they react.

⁵ **Eccentric** (*adjective*): strange or unusual

INDEPENDENT READING**DURING READING QUESTIONS**

[70] In the morning, as she left the apartment, Norma saw the card halves on the table. Impulsively,⁶ she dropped them into her purse. She locked the front door and joined Arthur in the elevator.

[71] While she was on her coffee break, she took the card halves from her purse and held the torn edges together. Only Mr. Steward's name and telephone number were printed on the card.

[72] After lunch, she took the card halves from her purse again and Scotch-taped the edges together. "Why am I doing this?" she thought.

[73] Just before five, she dialed the number. "Good afternoon," said Mr. Steward's voice.

[74] Norma almost hung up but restrained herself. She cleared her throat. "This is Mrs. Lewis," she said.

[75] "Yes, Mrs. Lewis," Mr. Steward sounded pleased.

[76] "I'm curious."

[77] "That's natural," Mr. Steward said.

[78] "Not that I believe a word of what you told us."

[79] "Oh, it's quite authentic,"⁷ Mr. Steward answered.

[80] "Well, whatever — " Norma swallowed. "When you said someone in the world would die, what did you mean?"

[81] "Exactly that," he answered. "It could be anyone. All we guarantee is that you don't know them. And, of course, that you wouldn't have to watch them die."

[82] "For \$50,000," Norma said.

[83] "That is correct."

[84] She made a scoffing sound. "That's crazy."

[85] "Nonetheless, that is the proposition,"⁸ Mr. Steward said. "Would you like me to return the button unit?"

[86] Norma stiffened. "*Certainly not.*" She hung up angrily.

[87] The package was lying by the front door; Norma saw it as she left the elevator. Well, of all the nerve, she thought. She glared at the carton as she unlocked the door. I just won't take it in, she thought. She went inside and started dinner.

[88] Later, she went into the front hall. Opening the door, she picked up the package and carried it into the kitchen, leaving it on the table.

[89] She sat in the living room, looking out the window. After a while, she went back into the kitchen to turn the cutlets in the broiler. She put the package in a bottom cabinet. She'd throw it out in the morning.

Paragraphs 70-89

C. **Find Evidence:** Norma says she thinks the button is "intriguing." Highlight three details that further develop this idea. (You can use a highlighter or underline in the text)

⁶ **Impulsive** (*adjective*): acting without thinking

⁷ **Authentic** (*adjective*): real or actual

⁸ **Proposition** (*noun*): an offer or a plan

PARTNER READING
DURING READING QUESTIONS

[90] "Maybe some eccentric millionaire is playing games with people," she said.

[91] Arthur looked up from his dinner. "I don't understand you."

[92] "What does *that* mean?"

[93] "*Let it go*," he told her.

[94] Norma ate in silence. Suddenly, she put her fork down. "Suppose it's a genuine offer?" she said.

[95] Arthur stared at her.

[96] "Suppose it's a genuine offer?"

[97] "All right, suppose it is?" He looked incredulous. "What would you like to do? Get the button back and push it? *Murder* someone?"

[98] Norma looked disgusted. "*Murder*."

[99] "How would you define it?"

[100] "If you don't even *know* the person?" Norma said.

[101] Arthur looked astounded. "Are you saying what I think you are?"

[102] "If it's some old Chinese peasant ten thousand miles away? Some diseased native in the Congo?"⁹

[103] "How about a baby boy in Pennsylvania?" Arthur countered. "Some beautiful little girl on the next block?"

[104] "Now you're loading things."

[105] "The point is, Norma," he continued, "what's the difference whom you kill? It's still murder."

[106] "The point *is*," Norma broke in, "if it's someone you've never seen in your life and never *will* see, someone whose death you don't even have to *know* about, you *still* wouldn't push the button?"

[107] Arthur stared at her, appalled. "You mean *you would*?"

[108] "Fifty thousand dollars, Arthur."

[109] "What has the amount — "

[110] "*Fifty thousand dollars*, Arthur," Norma interrupted. "A chance to take that trip to Europe we've always talked about."

[111] "Norma, no."

[112] "A chance to buy that cottage on the island."

[113] "Norma, *no*." His face was white.

[114] She shuddered. "All right, take it easy," she said. "Why are you getting so upset? It's only talk."

[115] After dinner, Arthur went into the living room. Before he left the table, he said, "I'd rather not discuss it anymore, if you don't mind."

[116] Norma shrugged. "Fine with me."

Paragraphs 94-116

D. **Find Evidence:** Highlight three details that show how Norma tries to persuade Arthur that they should press the button. (You can use a highlighter or underline in the text)

A. **Write:** How might Arthur react if Norma does push the button? How does this create tension?

B. **Make a prediction:** Do you think Norma will push the button?

A. Yes

B. No

⁹ a region and country in central Africa

WHOLE CLASS READING
DURING READING QUESTIONS

[117] She got up earlier than usual to make pancakes, eggs, and bacon for Arthur's breakfast.

[118] "What's the occasion?" he asked with a smile.

[119] "No occasion." Norma looked **offended**. "I wanted to do it, that's all."

[120] "Good," he said. "I'm glad you did."

[121] She refilled his cup. "Wanted to show you I'm not — " She shrugged.

[122] "Not what?"

[123] "Selfish."

[124] "Did I say you were?"

[125] "Well" — she gestured vaguely — "last night "

[126] Arthur didn't speak.

[127] "All that talk about the button," Norma said. "I think you — well, misunderstood me."

[128] "In what way?" His voice was guarded.

[129] "I think you felt" — she gestured again — "that I was only thinking of myself."

[130] "Oh."

[131] "I wasn't."

[132] "Norma — "

[133] "Well, I *wasn't*. When I talked about Europe, a cottage on the island — "

[134] "Norma, why are we getting so involved in this?"

[135] "I'm not involved at all." She drew in a shaking breath. "I'm simply trying to indicate that — "

[136] "*What?*"

[137] "That I'd like for *us* to go to Europe. Like for *us* to have a cottage on the island. Like for *us* to have a nicer apartment, nicer furniture, nicer clothes, a car. Like for *us* to finally have a *baby*, for that matter."

[138] "Norma, we will," he said.

[139] "*When?*"

[140] He stared at her in dismay. "Norma — "

[141] "*When?*"

[142] "Are you" — he seemed to draw back slightly — "are you really saying — "

[143] "I'm saying that they're probably doing it for some research project!" she cut him off. "That they want to know what average people would do under such a circumstance! That they're just *saying* someone would die, in order to study reactions, see if there'd be guilt, anxiety, whatever! You don't think they'd *kill* somebody, do you?!"

[144] Arthur didn't answer. She saw his hands trembling. After a while, he got up and left.

[145] When he'd gone to work, Norma remained at the table, staring into her coffee. I'm going to be late, she thought. She shrugged. What difference did it make? She should be home, anyway, not working in an office.

Paragraphs 134-145

A. **Write:** In paragraph 137, why does Norma use "us" over and over again?

E. **Find Evidence:** Highlight two details that reveal how Arthur reacts to Norma. (You can use a highlighter or underline in the text)

[146] While she was stacking dishes, she turned abruptly, dried her hands, and took the package from the bottom cabinet. Opening it, she set the button unit on the table. She stared at it for a long time before taking the key from its envelope and removing the glass dome. She stared at the button. How ridiculous, she thought. All this furor over a meaningless button.

[147] Reaching out, she pressed it down. For *us*, she thought angrily.

[148] She shuddered. Was it *happening*? A chill of horror swept across her.

[149] In a moment, it had passed. She made a contemptuous¹⁰ noise. *Ridiculous*, she thought. To get so worked up over nothing.

[150] She threw the button unit, dome, and key into the wastebasket and hurried to dress for work.

[151] She had just turned over the supper steaks when the telephone rang. She picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

[152] "Mrs. Lewis?"

[153] "Yes?"

[154] "This is the Lenox Hill Hospital."

[155] She felt unreal as the voice informed her of the subway accident — the shoving crowd, Arthur pushed from the platform in front of the train. She was conscious of shaking her head but couldn't stop.

[156] As she hung up, she remembered Arthur's life-insurance policy for \$25,000, with double indemnity¹¹ for —

[157] "No." She couldn't seem to breathe. She struggled to her feet and walked into the kitchen numbly. Something cold pressed at her skull as she removed the button unit from the wastebasket. There were no nails or screws visible. She couldn't see how it was put together.

[158] Abruptly, she began to smash it on the sink edge, pounding it harder and harder, until the wood split. She pulled the sides apart, cutting her fingers without noticing. There were no transistors in the box, no wires or tubes.

[159] The box was empty.

[160] She whirled with a gasp as the telephone rang. Stumbling into the living room, she picked up the receiver.

[161] "Mrs. Lewis?" Mr. Steward asked.

[162] It wasn't her voice shrieking so; it couldn't be. "*You said I wouldn't know the one that died!*"

[163] "My dear lady," Mr. Steward said. "Do you really think you knew your husband?"

Paragraph 163

Write: What does Mr. Steward mean when he asks if Norma really "knew [her] husband"?

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¹⁰ **Contemptuous** (*adjective*): disrespectful or disgusted

¹¹ Double indemnity is a common offering of life insurance policies. In the case of the accidental death of the insured person, the insurance company will pay the survivors twice the face value of the policy.

Further Analysis Questions

Directions: Complete the questions in full sentences. Aim to have a minimum of 3 sentences per response.

1. **Paragraphs 70-89:** How would the story be different if told from Arthur's point of view?

2. **Paragraphs 117-145:** How does the narrative point of view contribute to the suspense?

3. **Paragraphs 117-145:** What role does Arthur's character play in building suspense in the story?

Situational irony refers to an event that is the opposite from what a character or audience expects. Authors use situational irony to create surprise, suspense, or humor.

Example: A firehouse burning down.

4. **Paragraphs 151-157:** How does the author create situational irony in the story's resolution? How does this affect readers?

Name _____ Class _____

Independent Practice

Directions: Answer the multiple choice questions for “Button, Button.”

1. What is the meaning of “restrained” as it is used in paragraph 74? **[RL.4]**
 - A. calmed
 - B. encouraged
 - C. slowed
 - D. stopped

2. Mr. Steward returns the button unit to the Lewis home after his phone conversation with Norma. How does this action affect the Lewises? **[RL.3]**
 - A. It encourages Norma to consider using the button unit.
 - B. It makes Arthur think about the advantages of the button unit.
 - C. It makes Norma and Arthur suspect that Mr. Steward is a criminal.
 - D. It encourages Norma and Arthur to think of ways to improve their life.

3. What do paragraphs 97-106 reveal about Norma’s view of the world? **[RL.3]**
 - A. She believes that there are some things one should not do for money.
 - B. She believes people all over the world are essentially the same.
 - C. She believes it is every person’s job to care for others.
 - D. She believes some lives are worth more than others.

4. In paragraphs 129-145, what does the dialogue reveal about Norma’s motivations for pushing the button? **[RL.3]**
 - A. She is tired of arguing with Arthur.
 - B. She believes she deserves a better life.
 - C. She wants to become a more adventurous person.
 - D. She wants to be part of a psychological experiment.

Independent Practice

Directions: Answer the short response prompt for “Button, Button.” Your response should follow the checklist and be a minimum of 5-6 sentences. Be sure to include evidence from the text.

PROMPT: You have just read “Button, Button” by Richard Matheson.

How does the conversation between Norma and Arthur in paragraphs 90-116 build suspense? Use text evidence to support your response. **[RL.3, RL.6]**

If you do not remember the definition of suspense, be sure to look at the definition on the top of the page.

Before drafting your response, make sure to break down the prompt by:

- reading it carefully, identifying everything the prompt requires
- making a list of the prompt’s requirements

SELF CHECKLIST

- ☐ Highlight or bold the sentence that answers the prompt.

In your paragraph, did you ...

- ☐ Include details from paragraphs 90-116?
 - a. YES!
 - b. No, I will go back and add that.
- ☐ Explain how Norma and Arthur’s conversation builds suspense?
 - a. YES!
 - b. No, I will go back and add that.
- ☐ Name a literary technique used to build suspense?
 - a. YES!
 - b. No, I will go back and add that.

Name _____ Class _____

The Psychology of Suspense

R.J. Jacobs

About this Text

R.J. Jacobs has practiced as a psychologist since 2003, focusing on a wide variety of clinical concerns. He is also an author of psychological thrillers. His first novel, *And Then You Were Gone*, was published in 2019 and his second novel, *Somewhere In the Dark*, was published in 2020.

Purpose for Reading

To examine why readers are drawn to suspense so that we can further our understanding about why authors utilize different suspense-building techniques.

Read the following nonfiction article and complete the During Reading Questions in the margin where it says “during reading questions”.

DURING READING QUESTIONS

[1] Suspense is an uncomfortable pleasure. Effective mysteries and thrillers keep readers grinning and squirming at the same time. As a writer, I hope to create tension. As a psychologist,¹ I’m puzzled by why people want to feel it.

[2] Most people experience a mental health issue at some point in their life. In my clinical practice, part of my job is to respectfully offer help. I work from a position of empathy² and humility.³ Of course, when I write fiction, I want to employ conflict and struggle to create a compelling story. In this article, I refer to suspense as the feelings created by uncertainty in a narrative, combined with a sense that characters are in danger and the stakes are high. At the same time, the cognitive⁴ aspects of suspense — the guessing and wondering and problem-solving — should be acknowledged for creating those anxious, but sometimes oddly pleasurable feelings. The relationship between thinking and feeling is at the core of most modern psychotherapies (Cognitive-Behavioral and Dialectical-Behavioral Therapy, most notably). Thoughts conjure,⁵ and process, emotion.

[3] The mind seems to want to worry. Ask anyone who has ever tried meditation: staying in the present moment is very, very difficult. Theories abound about why thoughts wander toward negative outcomes, or into examining situations that will probably never happen.

[4] Anxiety is really about death. There is nothing larger to fear. A slip attributed to one of Freud’s patients is often told as a joke: “If one of us dies before the other, I think I’ll move to Paris.” To fear death is to fear *nothingness*. Our neuroses⁶ (we all

Paragraphs 1-2

A. How do the author’s two professions introduce conflicting ideas?

B. **Find Evidence:** Highlight 3-4 descriptions of suspense. You can use a highlighter or underline in the text. (In case you forget the definition of suspense....**Suspense** is a feeling of uncertainty or fear about what will happen next in a story.

¹ a scientist who studies the human mind and human emotions and behavior, and how different situations have an effect on people

² **Empathy** (noun): the ability to understand other people’s feelings and problems

³ **Humility** (*noun*): having a low view of one's own importance; the quality of being humble

⁴ **Cognitive** (*adjective*): relating to the processes of thinking and reasoning

⁵ **Conjure** (*verb*): to make something appear, often unexpectedly

⁶ less serious mental disorders that cause a sense of distress, worry, or fear

have them) can be viewed as complicated defenses against our fear of dying. To cope with this existential⁷ anxiety, it is preferable to fear *something* — or *some things* — over *nothing*. Psychopathology⁸ happens when our defenses fail us and we are confronted with an overload of reality.

[5] From an evolutionary biology perspective, neglecting a liability⁹ can have severe consequences. Worry is self-protective — no one wants to be caught off guard. We would rather be prepared for trouble than blindsided by an event we'd never considered — even if rationally we understand that event is unlikely. I often encourage patients to stay grounded where they are rather than “time travel” into the future. Life contains so many variables that the future is vastly unpredictable.

[6] In fictional suspense, the rules seem different. The same factors people detest in their day to day lives: time pressure, high stakes, physical danger, potentially catastrophic outcomes — keep people glued to a story. Readers can't help but be drawn in by wondering what will happen. Even if the genre's conventions¹⁰ are manipulations,¹¹ most readers will admit that they want to be manipulated to an extent. To go a step further: If mystery writers skip those tension-raising conventions, some readers become frustrated and stop reading.

[7] So, if anxiety is uncomfortable, where is the pleasure in suspense coming from?

1. It offers a form of control.

“If the story gets too intense, I can put the book down.”

[8] Why do people enjoy stories in the first place? Fiction gives us a vicarious¹² experience that allows us to consider the conflicts and themes in our own lives. Play is the opposite of depression, and by engaging our imaginations, stories give our mind space to play. Adult minds seem to consider fewer and fewer possibilities, perhaps to avoid wasting time in decision-making. When possibilities seem few, creativity has failed. The only way forward seems like a demotion.¹³

[9] Depression is loss. It offers a profound sense of discouragement.

[10] Play is invention. It is an instinct. Adults often forget this, but kids don't need to be reminded. If adults can be reassured that it is safe (no social consequences of embarrassment), if they are able to push through the resistance of self-consciousness, they will often jump at the chance to play in one form or another. We want to engage our imaginations, sometimes by creating narratives (even inventing our own characters), and acting them out. The narratives can be elaborate or very simple and illustrate basic human interpersonal themes of safety vs. danger, trust vs. suspicion, friend vs. adversary.

[11] One of the safest forms of play is following a story. In mystery and suspense, the stakes are just high enough that the narrative feels engaging but not

Paragraphs 4-5

Write: In your own words, summarize why people worry.

Paragraphs 6-7

A. **Find Evidence:** Highlight one detail that reveals a conflicting idea about suspense.

B. **Write:** In your own words, summarize the question the author intends to answer in the rest of the text.

⁷ relating to being alive

⁸ the scientific study of mental illness or disorders

⁹ responsibility

¹⁰ the way in which something is done

¹¹ ways of controlling people's emotions

¹² indirect or imagined

¹³ step down or downgrading

intolerable.¹⁴ Any one feeling can be difficult to sustain for a long period of time — grief, anger, even pleasure — can be tough to withstand. Suspenseful narratives offer readers less intense experiences of these emotions.

[12] One friend told me, “I suffer from anxiety and mysteries offer an escape. I’m drawn to reading suspense almost exclusively. It’s a different kind of anxiety that’s easier to experience — it’s contained and manageable.”

[13] For instance, the experience of discovering a kidnapped child would incite panic in most people, but in Taylor Adams’s *No Exit* the reader gets to observe from a safe distance — experiencing the feeling indirectly, by proxy.¹⁵

2. The mind wants to complete narratives.

[14] In suspense, the readers *become* the writer, in a way, restlessly imagining how the story will unfold. We can’t help ourselves — the mind craves a complete narrative and struggles with unresolved threads. Have you ever woken up from a bad dream with the desire to return to it, if only for a few minutes, to complete the story more satisfyingly?

[15] Mystery writers want narratives that are incomplete *enough* that their readers keep turning pages. We want to create a compulsive readability that has its own velocity — books our readers don’t want to put down, and can’t wait to get back to.

[16] *All The Missing Girls*, by Megan Miranda, is told in reverse, accentuating this dynamic. A reader can’t help but wonder, “where is this headed?” This curiosity is propulsive, driving us forward (or, in this case, backward).

3. It provides a neurochemical rush.

“I think, oh my God, what will happen next?”

[17] Suspense activates the amygdala¹⁶ and adrenal glands.¹⁷ That activation creates a rush — but a contained one. Pursuit is where the pleasure is. Anticipation is the rush. How is reading suspense different from running from a predator or watching a James Bond film? Neurologically, it isn’t. The reaction might be less severe, and the cognitive content different, but the cerebral¹⁸ activation sequence and neural pathways are exactly the same. The reader essentially micro-doses themselves with the same neurotransmitters that would be activated if an actual emergency was happening. And once the amygdala (an almond-shaped part of the brain, critical to the para-sympathetic nervous system) reacts, it takes some time for the person (the reader, the person being attacked, etc.) to return to a baseline level of calm.

[18] Sarah Pinborough’s *Behind Her Eyes* creates a feeling that an enormous twist is coming, almost teasingly so, through the entire narrative. Giving nothing away: while much has been said about the twist itself, much pleasure comes from the compulsive guessing leading up to it.

Paragraphs 10-13

A. Find Evidence: Highlight at least four details that support why people are drawn to suspenseful fiction.

B. Write: State the author's claim in this section in your own words. (The claim is the point that they are trying to make. What is the author trying to defend in this section?)

¹⁴ **Intolerable** (*adjective*): unbearable

¹⁵ through someone else’s experience

¹⁶ the part of the brain involved in experiencing emotions

¹⁷ small, triangular-shaped glands located on top of both kidneys that help regulate a person’s response to stress

¹⁸ relating to the brain

4. Suspense engages the mind.

"I sometimes feel like I could do better than the characters did."

[19] Figuring out the ending gives a sense of competence¹⁹. Some readers even say they feel a sense of superiority in knowing they could figure out how to solve the mystery when the characters could not.

[20] A friend of mine mentioned having this feeling while reading *The Woman in Cabin 10*, by Ruth Ware. He said, "I knew that if I was there, if I were her, I would be able to figure it all out. I would have added up the clues faster, and escaped."

[21] The nature of anxiety is uncertainty. You probably know someone who can't stand suspense — who would have to skip to the last chapter of a mystery novel to uncover the ending. The desire to hurry to the end is relatable, even if we have the self-restraint to endure the suspense. We find ourselves squirming, checking the time, and telling ourselves to read just a little more.

Paragraph 21

Write: How does the author's concluding paragraph emphasize the contrasting ideas introduced in paragraphs 1-5?

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¹⁹ **Competence** (*noun*): the ability to do something successfully

Name _____ Class _____

Independent Practice

Directions: Answer the multiple choice questions for “The Psychology of Suspense.”

1. What is the *best* meaning of the word “detest” as it is used in paragraph 6? **[RI.4]**
 - A. accept
 - B. hate
 - C. ignore
 - D. overlook

2. How does the example of a suspenseful novel in paragraph 18 support the author’s claim that people get pleasure from reading suspense? **[RI.5]**
 - A. It explains that anticipation can create a pleasing rush.
 - B. It explains how the brain responds to reading suspense.
 - C. It explains why readers feel rewarded when they are right.
 - D. It explains that anxiety caused by reading suspense is easily controlled.

3. What is the purpose of the *italicized* statements above paragraphs 8, 17, and 19? **[RI.5]**
 - A. to introduce a definition of each topic
 - B. to preview the main idea of that section
 - C. to reveal an expert's research about suspense
 - D. to provide an example from suspenseful novels

4. Which piece of evidence *best* supports the author's claim that “suspense is an uncomfortable pleasure”? **[RI.1]**
 - A. “Effective mysteries and thrillers keep readers grinning and squirming at the same time.” (Paragraph 1)
 - B. “In mystery and suspense, the stakes are just high enough that the narrative feels engaging but not intolerable.” (Paragraph 11)
 - C. “We can’t help ourselves — the mind craves a complete narrative and struggles with unresolved threads.” (Paragraph 14)
 - D. “You probably know someone who can’t stand suspense — who would have to skip to the last chapter of a mystery novel to uncover the ending.” (Paragraph 21)

Independent Practice

Directions: Answer the short response prompt for “The Psychology of Suspense.”

PROMPT: In “The Psychology of Suspense” by R.J. Jacobs, how does the author develop contrasting ideas about suspense? Use text evidence to support your response. **[RI.5]**

In your response, make sure to include all parts of a complete paragraph:

- a claim that clearly answers the prompt
- at least two pieces of relevant evidence
- reasoning to explain how your evidence connects to your claim

CHECKLIST FOR WRITING A COMPLETE PARAGRAPH:

- ☐ Circle or bold your **claim**.

Does your claim clearly answer all parts of the prompt?

- a. Yes
- b. No; I will go back and revise my claim.

- ☐ Underline each piece of **evidence** you included.

Do you have two pieces of relevant evidence?

- a. Yes
- b. No; I will go back and revise my evidence.

- ☐ Highlight your **reasoning**.

Does your reasoning explain how your evidence connects to your claim?

- a. Yes
- b. No; I will go back and revise my reasoning.

