Discussion Guide (and a few plot spoilers) for

Can I See Your I.D.? True Stories of False Identities

by Chris Barton
illustrations by Paul Hoppe
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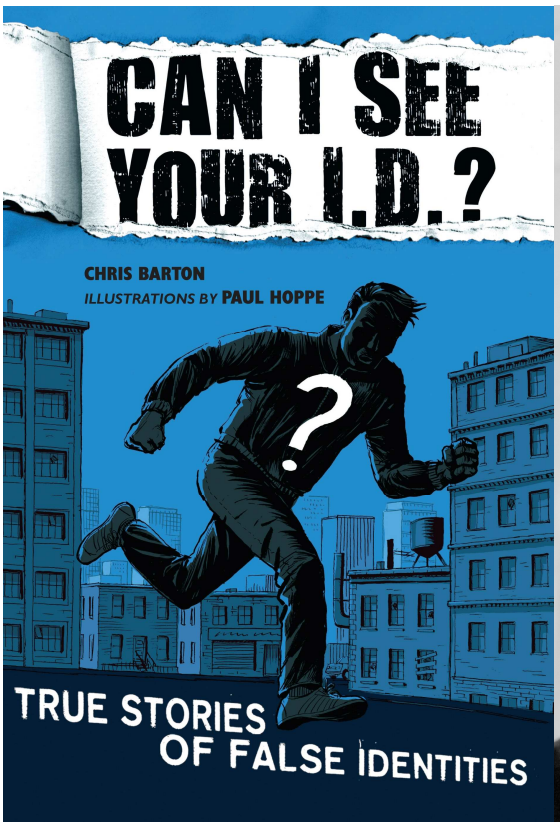

For more information about Chris, his books, and his presentations to students, writers, educators, and librarians, visit him at http://www.chrisbarton.info, where you can also read his late-1970s work *The Ozzie Bros. Meet The Monsters*, inspired by *Star Wars*, the Muppets, Abbott & Costello, and the movie-monster books he loved to check out from his school library. You can follow him at http://twitter.com/Bartography or mail him at P.O. Box 170151, Austin, TX 78717.

Dear Reader,

What would make you pretend to be someone else?

For my subjects in *Can I See Your I.D.? True Stories of False Identities*, the reasons were many: They wanted to make it in Hollywood. They didn't want to be killed by Nazis. They wanted to escape from slavery. They didn't want to go broke. They *really* wanted to drive a subway train. And so on.

This is a book about identities both false and true, because all of these people pretending to be someone else were, at the same time, truly themselves on the inside. I believe that's a theme that a lot of readers can relate to, but especially young adults.

During adolescence, “Who am I?” is neither an idle nor an uncommon question. I hoped that my researching and telling these ten stories would help both me and my readers understand the reasons a person would assume a false identity, the specifics involved in pulling off such fakery, and the psychic toll taken by that kind of deception.

And to give you, the reader, a feel for that experience, I wrote *Can I See Your I.D.?* in a way that puts you in each subject's shoes – that gives you, for a few pages, a new identity.

I hope you're up for that, and that this book gives you lots to think about, and lots to discuss. Most of all, I hope you enjoy it.

Yours (truly!),

Excerpt from the chapter "(Subway Motorman?) Keron Thomas"

If there had been trains on the island of Trinidad, where you lived until you were twelve, you might have gotten your thing for them out of your system by now. But there weren't, and you didn't, and that's why you're here at the 207th Street subway station carrying a bag of motorman's tools and signing someone else's name.

If all goes well, they'll never know that your name is Keron Thomas and that you're sixteen. If all goes well, they'll believe you when you tell them that you're Regoberto Sabio, and they'll have no idea that he's supposed to be forty-four years old. You're a six-footer, but you can't pass for forty-four. Twenty-four, maybe. But not forty-four.

You met Sabio while you were hanging out on the Franklin Avenue shuttle he operates weekday afternoons and evenings back in Brooklyn. You knew so much about the subway already that you didn't come off as suspiciously eager to learn more. In fact, you told Sabio you were a motorman too, on another line. Obviously, you were a young, single motorman with time on his hands and a need for a mentor. Why else would you have ridden his four-stop route back and forth in the cab with him for several hours each week since last winter?

In addition to the tools, you'd gotten your hands on this Transit Authority uniform shirt. You kept it in your bag at school, and you'd throw it on before you got to the Franklin Avenue station. Between that T.A. shirt and your calm, mature demeanor, nobody would look at you and see a teenage train fanatic. That allowed you to observe Sabio up close and learn a lot more than you could have while watching a motorman through a closed cab door.

You paid close attention to everything Sabio did. As he ran his train down the line and back, you picked up on the lingo from his radio chats with the tower. You watched him brake when he came into a station, saw how he eased the train back out again. He's a talkative guy, so there was a lot of conversation in there, a lot of advice. "Don't stay out drinking the night before you've got a shift," he'd tell you. "Don't let management tell you how to wear your hair," "Take notes on everything you do," and so forth. It was all professional advice, not technical, because he thought you already knew the mechanics of operating a train, right?

Somewhere along the way, you got the idea that you probably did know enough to drive the train. But you didn't want to just know—you wanted to do. And this week when Sabio mentioned that vacation he had coming up, you saw your chance.

You asked some questions not too surprising coming from a rookie motorman: Who's going to take your shift while you're out? Can I do it? How do I go about getting some overtime, anyway?

He said, "Call the crew office and see what they say."

Which you did.

Late last night.

In Sabio's name.

But you didn't ask for his Franklin Shuttle route.

You told them what train you really wanted. Come on in, they told you. 207th street station, they said. And here you are—where, most likely, nobody knows that the real Regoberto Sabio is not only much older than you but four inches shorter and forty pounds lighter. They probably don't know that he wears a beard or sports dreadlocks down past his waist.

"I'm the extra man," you tell the dispatcher. "You have a train for me?"

Discussion Questions

1. Which of the ten people profiled had the most admirable motivations?
2. Which ones had the least admirable motivations?
3. Which characters' motivations are the hardest to categorize one way or the other?
4. *Can I See Your I.D.?* is narrated in second person ("you"), rather than in the more traditional first person ("I") or third ("she" or "he"). What are some advantages of this approach? What downside(s) do you see? Are there profiles where this approach is more or less effective than it is in others?
5. Which of these pretenders, impostors, and masqueraders would you most likely have fooled by if you'd met them? Which false identities do you think you would have seen through?
6. Forrest Carter, Riley Weston, and John Howard Griffin's masquerades were all in support of artistic or literary endeavors, but Griffin's deception is generally viewed much more favorably than Carter's and Weston's. Why? Is that fair?
7. Ellen Craft's and Solomon Perel's false identities saved their lives. Were their actions heroic? Ferdinand Waldo Demara Jr., under his assumed name, may have saved the lives of others – three wounded South Korean guerrillas. Was he a hero?
8. What challenges would you face if you tried to reenact the exploits of Keron Thomas, Private Wakeman, Princess Caraboo, or Frank Abagnale Jr. today? Would the actions of any of the subjects in *Can I See Your I.D.?* be easier to pull off today than they were at the time they happened?
9. In the Author's Note, Chris Barton lists three key lessons for anyone trying to pass themselves off as someone else. Can you think of other lessons suggested by the profiles in *Can I See Your I.D.?*

Chris Barton's Biography

I grew up about 80 miles east of Dallas, in the small town of Sulphur Springs, Texas. When I was a teenager, my reading diet consisted largely of *Rolling Stone*, a biography of John Lennon written by Ray Coleman, and humor columns by Dave Barry. I loved writing with my friends, whether it was making up parodies of superheroes and soap operas or putting out an award-winning student newspaper.

It was that love of being part of a writing community that led me to the University of Texas at Austin. In spring of my sophomore year in high school, I happened to visit UT during the week when the campus newspaper published the farewell columns written by graduating staff members. Those columns made *The Daily Texan* sound like the most idyllic, amazing, and fun place to be for a guy who liked to write and spend time with other writers.

Upon arriving at UT as a student, I immediately joined the *Texan* staff. I eventually graduated with a degree in history, but the majority of my education happened in that basement newspaper office. Being around those folks turned out not only to be lots of fun, but also to inspire me to write things that they – skilled writers themselves – would laugh at or find interesting or be moved by.

A few years later, I stumbled into another group of Austin writers — a kind, smart, funny, supportive bunch of children's and YA writers and illustrators. I recognized them immediately as my kind of people. Not long after that, I remembered a newspaper article I'd read about the brothers who invented Day-Glo. That would make a cool story for children, I thought. Eight years later, it became my first book.

Today I have several books on the way and lots of ideas for other stories I'd like to tell. I still live in Austin and still enjoy sharing my writing with my friends, and sharing in their successes. And one of my biggest joys is seeing the older of my two sons devouring Dave Barry and sharing his own writing with his friends.

Interview with Chris Barton

Where did you get the idea for *Can I See Your I.D.?*

As with my first book, *The Day-Glo Brothers* – which originated with the obituary of inventor Bob Switzer – *Can I See Your I.D.?* had its genesis in something I read in *The New York Times* many years before I actually started writing. In May 1993, I had just left New York after a semester there interning at *Rolling Stone* and *Sassy* magazines. I was slow to give up my habit of reading the *Times*, though, and my frequent use of the subway that spring meant that the headline "Subway Caper Fueled by Passion for Trains" was sure to grab my attention.

More than a dozen years later, Keron Thomas' story was still lodged in my memory. At

some point along the way, I had written myself a note that maybe I would like to write something about John Howard Griffin, the white author who darkened his skin for a hellish tour of the American South documented in his book *Black Like Me*. At that point, I don't think I'd ever read his book, so who knows why he had crossed my mind, but every time I'd review my file of non-fiction book ideas, there he was.

Then I read in Susan Campbell Bartoletti's *Hitler Youth* about Solomon Perel, a teenage German Jew who spent World War II under a fake name at a school for the budding Nazi elite. When I read the Bartoletti book, it struck me that Perel, Thomas and Griffin all had this common theme in their lives of pretending to be someone they weren't, and I wondered, "What would *that* be like? And who else would know?"

Frank Abagnale – the character played by Leonardo DiCaprio in *Catch Me If You Can* – came immediately to mind. So did Riley Weston, who a few years earlier had passed herself off as a 19-year-old (she was 32) to write for the TV show *Felicity*.

Other candidates quickly presented themselves: a surgery-performing high school dropout, a female Civil War soldier, the Klansman-turned-"Cherokee" author of *The Education of Little Tree*, a poor British woman who convinced members of the upper class that she was a kidnapped Asian princess, and a female slave from Georgia disguised as a white master for her escape.

Some additional subjects, I had to scavenge for. But the origin of the entire project came down to me being lucky enough to hang on to three very different ideas long enough for them to bump into each other and become one larger one.

How did you come to write *Can I See Your I.D.?* in second person?

As I remember it, I had stacks of research on Keron Thomas and Solomon Perel, ideas for several other candidates, and not a single word written down. I hadn't yet come up with a voice, with a way into those first two very different stories. Then one night it occurred to me that maybe I could write these profiles in second person, the better to understand what these people experienced, and to see how they must have been perceived by the people around them, and to put the reader behind the mask of each masquerader.

But "you"? A whole book addressed to "you"? My initial reaction was a mix of "Oh, but I couldn't" and "Oh, but I must." Obviously, "must" won out. I tried it and liked the results, and although the editor who had first shown interest in the project was appalled, from then on, I couldn't imagine not writing this book that way.

What were the challenges in writing the book in second person?

Getting the voice right has presented two opposing challenges. One is to have each profile put a different spin on the narration so that it doesn't just sound like my usual self over and over, only in second person instead of third. A voice that will put a reader inside the head of a late-20th-century Hollywood faker is a little different from one that will

allow that same reader to identify with a Georgia slave making a break for freedom. Some of the voices in the book are zippy, some are anguished, but each reflects—I hope—the subject's personality, the circumstances of the deception depicted, and the time and place in which the profile is set.

The other challenge, though, was to maintain some consistency throughout so that the profiles seem to belong together in the same book. For Private Wakeman, for instance, my original portrayal of her grammatical shortcomings was so jarring in comparison to the other subjects that I decided to instead look for other ways to convey the limits of her education. Sustaining any voice—let alone an unusual one, with these sorts of complex considerations—over the course of something many times longer than a picture book was harder than any writing I'd ever done before. I'm glad I gave it a shot.

The trickiest profile to write in second person was that of Forrest Carter, the *Little Tree* author, who had died 12 years before the "key episode" I wanted to capture. For him, I ended up going with what I call "second person posthumous," which was so much fun that I'm tempted to do a whole nonfiction book that way.

But maybe just a picture book.

What were some of the other challenges you encountered when working on this book?

One was finding the material that would allow me to recreate these actual scenes, including dialogue, without fabricating or fictionalizing, and another was blending the action with the backstory, shifting from one to the other, in a way that felt natural and believable and realistic.

I got past those challenges, or tried to, through a combination of researching long and writing short.

I collected a lot of information about these people's lives, and about the times and places where these scenes occur. Sometimes, I just got extremely lucky, such as finding a book that provided the daily temperatures during the Civil War for the particular place I needed – and then discovering that it was unusually cold there that day, which gave me the sort of detail I needed in order to make the scene seem real. But the more I got to know these people, and especially the more time I was able to spend with their own words, the better I was able to glean distinctive elements of their voices to combine with my narrative voice, and the better I was able to understand how they saw their own situations.

My goal of keeping the profiles brief forced me to zero in on what truly needed to be said, and to subtly and efficiently suggest a subject's personality or background through the voice rather than through a direct expression of the sorts of individual characteristics that people tend to take for granted about themselves, and to smooth out or remove entirely any potentially confusing shifts between what was happening and what had happened previously.

Were there other subjects you considered but decided not to include? Who were they, and why didn't you include them?

The main one was Anastasia – or rather, Anna Anderson, the woman who claimed to have been Anastasia, the daughter of the Russian czar who was executed along with his entire family during the Communist revolution in 1918. The notion that this one girl escaped had a lot of appeal to a lot of people, and many of them took very seriously the possibility that Anderson was indeed the Grand Duchess Anastasia.

For my purposes, this story had one big problem: DNA evidence could prove that Anderson was not Anastasia, but she herself never acknowledged her deceit and let on what her real story was, and I was not convinced by the "true identity" – her real name and background – offered up by her detractors. I couldn't figure out how to write about her pretending to be someone she wasn't – and put readers in her shoes – if I didn't know who she really was and didn't even know for sure who *she* thought she really was.

What is your writing process like? How much research is involved?

The one constant in my biography-writing process is the timeline – before I do much more than jot down phrases or fragments of text that occur to me, I like to put together a chronology of the major and not-so-major-but-still-interesting events in the person's life. Even if those events seem to fall outside the period I expect to write about, knowing what came before and after helps me understand for myself and frame for my readers the period that I do focus on.

Once I've got that timeline and I have sense of where my story starts and ends, then I'll play around with various approaches to beginning the story, to setting a tone that's a good fit for the subject, that I can sustain over the entire book, and that connects with where I think the story will end up. Until I've got the start of the story more or less down – the part of the story that will take a reader maybe two page turns into a picture book – I'm not much interested in going any further.

Is your research process in any way predictable? Is it an entirely different animal for each book?

The timeline is also useful for organizing my research, and I need that help because I tend to err on the side of over-researching my subjects – those are the most predictable things about my research process. Among other things, having that chronology allows me to see side-by-side distinct accounts of the same event that may not quite agree on the facts, and that shows me where I need to dig a little deeper to get as close as possible to what really happened.

I keep a log of all my contacts – every email, every phone call – for a project so that I can thank them properly when the time comes but also so that I can review those notes while

I'm still researching, so that I can remind myself of leads I wanted to follow up on. For *Can I See Your I.D.?*, I used so many different types of sources – from 190-year-old newspaper accounts to a not-yet-aired documentary – that I took extra care with the research notes and bibliography in the finished book so that I can use that as a roadmap of possible avenues for research for my future projects.

Reviews & Praise

A Junior Library Guild selection

Publishers Weekly
Starred Review *[I]mpeccably crafted ... The use of second-person narration is very effective, allowing readers to assume the identities of each individual. Barton's prose captures the daring, ingenuity, and quick thinking required of each imposter.*

The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books
Recommended *The author takes on a suspenseful, energized second-person style and focuses most accounts on a key high-risk moment ... The offbeat, intriguing topic, breezy, accessible style, and compact chapters will sell this to reluctant readers and wide-ranging nonfiction fans alike, and it'd be a gem of a readaloud.*

Kirkus Reviews
Barton's use of the second-person point of view gives these stories dramatic tension and a sense of immediacy. Hoppe's graphic panels enhance this effect. ... Teens in the thick of creating identities themselves will find this riveting.

Booklist
Hoppe's black-and-white line drawings lend a gritty comics quality to each story. ... Thoroughly researched and grippingly presented.

Kathryn Fredrickson, Rolling Meadows (IL) Library, Member of the 2010 Sibert Medal Committee
Written with wit and urgency, Barton makes you wonder what YOU might be capable of doing!

Ingram Library Services
[T]hrilling ... exciting.

Teri Lesesne, Professor of YA Literature at Sam Houston State University, Member of the 2010 Printz Medal Committee
Quick, short chapters will make this another hit with reluctant readers.

Pink Me
I really look forward to handing this to older middle school [students] and up ... as a lively piece of leisure reading.

Carol Hampton Rasco, President, Reading Is Fundamental
Libraries, be prepared! This book will have students clamoring for materials from the extensive BIBLIOGRAPHY, even students you least expect. I myself could hardly put it down. Fascinating!

Denise Vallandingham, Boone County (KY) Public Library, Member of the 2010 Sibert Medal Committee
An eye-opener with a bold twist. ... suspenseful, enjoyable and informative.

Chris Barton's Other Books

Chris is the author of the *New York Times* and *Publishers Weekly* bestseller *Shark Vs. Train* (Little, Brown; 2010; illustrated by Tom Lichtenheld). It was named one of the best books of the year by *Publishers Weekly, School Library Journal, Kirkus Reviews, Parents, The Washington Post*, Barnes & Noble, and the Bank Street College of Education. It is also a finalist for the 2011 Children's Choice Book Awards and a Junior Library Guild selection, and it received a silver honor from the Parents' Choice Awards.

He is also the author of the American Library Association Sibert Honor-winning *The Day-Glo Brothers* (Charlesbridge, 2009; illustrated by Tony Persiani), the biography of the inventors of those daylight-fluorescent oranges, yellows, and greens you see every day. It was named one of the best books of 2009 by *Publishers Weekly, School Library Journal, Kirkus Reviews,* and *The Washington Post*.