

Anna and the French Kiss, by Stephanie Perkins

Anna is about to be thrust into a life for which she is totally unprepared. She is about to spend her last year of high school in Paris, the City of Lights. She doesn't speak French. She has never been to boarding school. She has never encountered the sparks she feels for Etienne St. Clair. To complicate matters, Étienne is not single, yet things keep happening that push Anna and Étienne towards each other. Will Anna's wishes be answered with a true French kiss?

Discussion Questions

- Upon leaving Atlanta, Anna suddenly feels that she doesn't have a home anymore. When do you think Anna decides where her home is in the novel?
- Anna seems to feel abandoned by her parents. How does she grow as a person from being in Paris on her own?
- Was it wrong of Anna's father to send her to boarding school in Paris? Should Anna have been given a choice, or did her parents really do her a favor by making her go away to school?
- Anna feels a lot of physical signs of stress. When do you think Anna relaxes into her life in Paris? What events and which people helped ease and complicate her transition?
- What were your initial thoughts on Étienne's feelings towards Anna? How did they change throughout the story?
- Which lesson in life that Anna learned was the most important? Why?
- What things would you have liked to see happen in the story? Which characters seemed most real to you?
- Did you feel frustrated by the behavior of Étienne St. Clair? Did it bother you that he couldn't break up with his girlfriend and that he kept leading Anna on? Should he have acted differently? How would the story have been better or worse if he had broken up with Ellie sooner?
- How would this story have been different if it had been set in another place or in another kind of school? Was it important that Paris was the backdrop for Anna's story? Could it have happened in an ordinary public school somewhere in the U.S.?
- Was Bridgette wrong to date Toph? What could she have done differently to protect her friendship with Anna?
- Do you feel like you know Anna, St. Clair, Meredith, Josh, and Rashmi? Would you have written the story differently to emphasize any of these or other characters?
- How do you feel about the ending?

Between Shades of Gray, by Ruth Sepetys

Summary and discussion questions from www.betweenshadesofgray.com.

In 1941, fifteen-year-old Lina is preparing for art school, first dates, and all that summer has to offer. But one night, the Soviet secret police barge violently into her home, deporting her along with her mother and younger brother. They are being sent to Siberia. Lina's father has been separated from the family and sentenced to death in a prison camp. All is lost. Lina fights for her life, fearless, vowing that if she survives she will honor her family, and the thousands like hers, by documenting their experience in her art and writing. She risks everything to use her art as messages, hoping they will make their way to her father's prison camp to let him know they are still alive. It is a long and harrowing journey, and it is only their incredible strength, love, and hope that pull Lina and her family through each day. But will love be enough to keep them alive?

Discussion Questions

- As the novel opens, Lina explains that though the signs were in place, she has little understanding that her parents had planned to attempt to escape Lithuania. What can be inferred about her understanding of the political climate in her country? Do you think her surprise is a typical reaction for a teen? Why or why not?
- Lina's mother remains calm throughout the roundup of her family; how does her family benefit from this?
- When Jonas observes his mother smashing her beloved china and crystal before they depart their home, he asks her why she is destroying these items. She replies, "Because I love them so much." (p. 18) Do you consider this an act of rebellion? In your opinion, is her reaction appropriate? In what ways is she trying to control the situation?
- As Lina's family is first placed in the truck to take them to the trains, they meet the bald man who proclaims loudly, "We're all going to die. We will surely die." (p. 22) How does his presence affect the other prisoners? Consider and explain how Lina and her mother react to his rants. In what ways is Elena (Lina's mother) sympathetic to his condition?
- Using textual examples, what are some of the specific ways Lina's mother chooses to fight back against the NKVD?
- Being held prisoner on the train brings out the best and worst in some of the inhabitants. Consider and discuss some of the ways that individuals extend their assistance and support. How do their choices differ from those who are most unkind to others?
- Lina unflinchingly shares the nature of the condition in which she and the other prisoners are forced to live. What feelings does this candor evoke in you?

- How does the author use the embedded flashbacks to help readers understand why Lina's family has been rounded up for punishment? Do you agree with the family's choices? Why or why not?
- Though readers mostly learn about Kostas, Lina's father, through her shared memories, a great deal can be understood about his character. In your opinion, what kind of man is he? Is he a good father? Use textual evidence to make your case.
- Why does Lina's mother, Elena, pretend she doesn't know her cousin Regina? What is she trying to accomplish? What can be gleaned about Elena from this encounter?
- Though Ona's baby is a newborn, she is still considered an enemy of the state due to the actions of her father. What can be understood about the government's policy?
- Upon arriving at the country train depot, the NKVD officers begin sorting the prisoners, and Lina asks, "Have you ever wondered what a human life is worth? That morning, my brother's was worth a pocket watch." (page 35). How does this realization change Lina? In what ways does Lina better understand her mother's actions and motivations?
- After Jonas is selected to be separated from his mother and sister, their mother is able to save his life by using her language skills and quick wit. What are some of the specific things she does to secure his safety?
- Discuss the character traits that allow Lina, Jonas, and Andrius to ultimately persevere. How are these characters similar to each other? In what ways are they different? Which character are you most like?
- Throughout the novel, Lina uses her passion for her art to remain connected to her family and the outside world. What are some of the specific ways she does this?
- What role does Andrius play in the story? In what ways is he a catalyst for the choices made by Lina and Jonas?
- Consider the consequences of not signing the documents which charge the prisoners of counterrevolutionary activities against the Soviet Union. Does Lina's family make the right decision by refusing to "confess" these transgressions? Why or why not?
- Though Lina believes that Andrius and his mother are supplying information to the NKVD officers in exchange for food and shelter, she eventually learns that the arrangement comes at a great cost to his family. How does this knowledge of the lengths his mother goes to in order to keep him safe ultimately affect him? How does Lina's understanding of these sacrifices reshape her perception of him? His mother?
- Throughout the novel, the bald man is cast as an unsympathetic character. How do his random acts of kindness help portray him as more than one dimensional? Cite

specific instances from the story where you find evidence of this. Why might the author choose to include these examples?

- Using the phrase, "This is a story about...," supply five words to describe *Between Shades of Gray*. Explain your choices.

***Divergent*, by Veronica Roth**

In Beatrice Prior's dystopian Chicago, society is divided into five factions, each dedicated to the cultivation of a particular virtue—Candor (the honest), Abnegation (the selfless), Dauntless (the brave), Amity (the peaceful), and Erudite (the intelligent). On an appointed day of every year, all sixteen-year-olds must select the faction to which they will devote the rest of their lives. For Beatrice, the decision is between staying with her family and being who she really is—she can't have both. So she makes a choice that surprises everyone, including herself.

During the highly competitive initiation that follows, Beatrice renames herself Tris and struggles to determine who her friends really are—and where, exactly, a romance with a sometimes fascinating, sometimes infuriating boy fits into the life she's chosen. But Tris also has a secret, one she's kept hidden from everyone because she's been warned it can mean death. And as she discovers a growing conflict that threatens to unravel her seemingly perfect society, she also learns that her secret might help her save those she loves . . . or it might destroy her.

Discussion Questions

- What faction would you have chosen? Why?
- Do you think the world *Divergent* is set in is believable? Could something similar actually happen? Explain.
- What do you think about the choices Tris made throughout the book?
- What was your favorite part?
- What do you think will happen in the next book?
- Is *Divergent* similar to other books that you have read? If so, how does it measure up?
- Which events/characters in the book can you relate to your own life?
- What theme/message do you think Veronica Roth (the author) is attempting to get across to the reader?

***The False Princess*, by Eilis O'Neal**

Summary and discussion questions from the publisher's website:

<http://www.egmontusa.com/files/2011/04/The-False-Princess-Discussion-Guide.pdf>

Princess and heir to the throne of Thorvaldor, Nalia has led a privileged life at court. But everything changes when she learns, just after her sixteenth birthday, that she is a false princess, a stand-in for the real Nalia, who has been hidden away for her protection. Cast out with little more than the clothes on her back, the girl now called Sinda must leave behind the city, her handsome best friend, Kiernan, and the only life she's ever known.

Sent to live with her only surviving relative—a cold, scornful woman with little patience for her newfound niece—Sinda proves inept at even the simplest tasks. Then she discovers that magic runs through her veins—long-suppressed, dangerous magic that she must learn to control—and she realizes that she will never learn to be just a simple village girl. Sinda returns to the city to seek answers. Instead, she uncovers a secret that could change the course of Thorvaldor's history forever. An intricately plotted and completely satisfying adventure, *The False Princess* is both an engaging tale in the tradition of great fantasy novels and a story never told before that will enchant—and surprise—its readers.

Discussion Questions

- Despite personality differences that make them an unlikely pair, Sinda and Kiernan have a close bond. What do you think draws the two of them together?
- After the spell that made Sinda appear to be the real princess is removed, her natural magic rises to the surface. Would you like to have magical powers of your own? If you could choose, how would you use your magic?
- After she is cast out of the palace, Sinda is sent to live with her Aunt Varil, who comments that the King and Queen have ruined Sinda for a normal life. Do you agree with this? Do you think there was ever a chance Sinda could have lived happily in Treb with her aunt? Explain your answer.
- Why do you think Aunt Varil doesn't warn Sinda about her magic? Do you think she is right in her reasoning? Why or why not?
- Why do you think that Philantha took Sinda under her wing after going without an apprentice for fifteen years? Cite examples from the text that support your reasoning.
- Kiernan tells Sinda that he was kind to Nalia because he felt that the two girls were in the same boat. Do you agree? How do their situations differ and how are they the same?

- When Sinda accuses Melanie of betraying Thorvaldor, Melanie says she would prefer to consider it righting an old wrong. What do you think? Do you think Melanie was justified in what she did? Why or why not?
- “The crown used you and tossed you aside when it was finished with you. But they didn’t have to. They could have helped you, rather than shipping you off to a backward village the same day” (page 252). Do you agree with Melanie? Could the King and Queen have handled things differently? What would you have done in their place?
- Sinda risks her life to help save the same kingdom that cast her out after she had served her purpose. What would you have done if you were in her place? Would you have risked so much after what you had been through? Explain your answer.
- “I’ve been thinking. It’s like we were saying, out there on the road. Something’s wrong here, in Thorvaldor, under all the things that are right. ... And I’ve been thinking, maybe this, all this, maybe it happened so I’d know it. ‘Cause I wouldn’t have, if I’d grown up like I was supposed to” (pages 313-314). Consider this statement. List the ways in which Mika’s upbringing will help her be a better princess than she might have been if she had grown up at court.

***Glow*, by Amy Kathleen Ryan**

Waverly soars toward a distant planet on the Emyrean, the only home she has ever known. Her parents escaped a failing Earth before she was born. Now fifteen, she’s expected to marry handsome Kiernan, soon to become the captain of their spaceship. Young people will colonize the new planet, so Waverly knows marriage and motherhood are in her near future. A life with Kiernan seems pleasant and safe--although secretly she’s intrigued by volatile, brooding Seth.

Attack and capture replace her romantic dilemma with a life-or-death struggle. The Emyrean’s sister ship, the New Horizon, turns on its crew, kidnapping all the young women. The adults are dead, wounded or scattered. Waverly has to sort truth from fiction to protect the other girls, while Kiernan’s authority is put to the test.

Discussion Questions

- For young people on the Emyrean, having children—and having them early and often--is their duty. What was your reaction to reading this? What should be the reaction of the characters in *Glow*? Should having children be regarded as a duty? Why or why not?

- Kieran thinks Waverly is “definitely the best girl on board” (page 8). Waverly decides that “of all the boys near her age on board the ship, he seemed to be the best” (page 15). What characteristics make Kieran and Waverly the “best” choices for each other? Is being the best in a small pool of choices enough reason to choose a lifelong mate? What criteria would you use?
- *Glow* has a host of characters, from Waverly and Kieran to Seth, Felicity, Samantha, Sarek, and so on. Which ones do you find the most interesting? What character or characters did you want to know more about? Would you have enjoyed the book more if it had emphasized different characters?
- Kieran has always expected to become captain of the Empyrean, and he has been in training for the job. Why does he have such a difficult time leading the other boys after the New Horizon attacks their ship? What would you have done differently?
- How does Waverly become a leader of the captured girls? Who is more successful at leadership: Waverly or Kieran? Why? What other character or characters exhibit successful leadership qualities? Give reasons for your answer.
- What is the relationship of young people to adults on the Empyrean before and after the attack, and on the New Horizon? How and why does the author establish these relationships? What will happen if and when adults on the Empyrean recover? Do you think that any of the adults are trustworthy?
- In the epilogue, Waverly tells Kieran, “There is something wrong with pretending to be a prophet.” Why does she say this, and what does she mean? Is Kieran pretending to be a prophet? Is Anne Mather?
- The characters in *Glow* have to make serious moral choices. Name some of them, and describe how the characters make their choices. Do you agree with their decisions? Why or why not?
- *Glow* is the first in the Sky Chasers series. Did you find its ending satisfying? If you were going to write its sequel, how would you resolve the love triangle between Kieran, Seth, and Waverly? The conflict between the New Horizon and the Empyrean? The next step in rescuing the adults? Are you planning to read the sequel? Why or why not?

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, by Rebecca Skloot

Booktalk from the publisher’s website:

<http://www.randomhouse.com/book/168191/the-immortal-life-of-henrietta-lacks-by-rebecca-skloot>

Her name was Henrietta Lacks, but scientists know her as HeLa. She was a poor Southern tobacco farmer who worked the same land as her slave ancestors, yet her cells—taken without her knowledge—became one of the most important tools in medicine. The first “immortal” human cells grown in culture, they are still alive today, though she has been dead for more than sixty years. If you could pile all HeLa cells ever grown onto a scale, they’d weigh more than 50 million metric tons—as much as a hundred Empire State Buildings. HeLa cells were vital for developing the polio vaccine; uncovered secrets of cancer, viruses, and the atom bomb’s effects; helped lead to important advances like in vitro fertilization, cloning, and gene mapping; and have been bought and sold by the billions.

Yet Henrietta Lacks remains virtually unknown, buried in an unmarked grave.

Rebecca Skloot takes us on an extraordinary journey, from the “colored” ward of Johns Hopkins Hospital in the 1950s to stark white laboratories with freezers full of HeLa cells; from Henrietta’s small, dying hometown of Clover, Virginia—a land of wooden slave quarters, faith healings, and voodoo—to East Baltimore today, where her children and grandchildren live and struggle with the legacy of her cells.

Henrietta’s family did not learn of her “immortality” until more than twenty years after her death, when scientists investigating HeLa began using her husband and children in research without informed consent. And though the cells had launched a multimillion-dollar industry that sells human biological materials, her family never saw any of the profits. As Rebecca Skloot so brilliantly shows, the story of the Lacks family—past and present—is inextricably connected to the dark history of experimentation on African Americans, the birth of bioethics, and the legal battles over whether we control the stuff we are made of.

Discussion Questions courtesy of UW-Madison’s Go Big Read Discussions Planning Committee and the Institute for Cross-College Biology Education Book Group.

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<http://www.gobigread.wisc.edu/Discussion-Toolkit/Questions2011.pdf>

- *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* is the story of an African American woman and her family that touches on many big issues: bioethics, racism, poverty, science, faith, and more. What threads stand out for you, and why?
- Race and racism are woven throughout the book, both in the story presented and in the process of the research for the book. Skloot was yet another white person asking the Lacks family about Henrietta. How do you feel about a white woman creating the narrative of this story? How did her race help or hinder Skloot in the writing and researching of the book?

- The author notes social inequities both explicitly and implicitly. What parts of Henrietta's story might be different if she had been white? What might have been different if she had been middle or upper-middle class?
- What role did the deferential attitude toward doctors in the early 20th century play in the interaction between Henrietta and her family and Johns Hopkins? How has that attitude toward doctors changed over the decades? Do patients' socioeconomic differences affect the relationship today?
- Henrietta Lacks died in 1951, but her cancer cells are still alive today. Do you think they carry some essence of Henrietta? How do you think you would perceive cells from someone close to you that grow in culture in a laboratory?
- A week after you finish reading the book, will you remember how cells divide? Do you now have a better understanding of cell biology? Either way, does it matter to you?
- What does this book tell us about the history of science and how science has progressed since the 1950s? After reading this book and considering the events it details, what do you think are key factors that influence scientific progress?
- The book is filled with stories of people used as research subjects, sometimes without their knowledge, sometimes with ill-informed consent, sometimes because of their inability to understand (patients with mental illness) or resist (prisoners). Were you aware of this history before reading the book? Do you think doctors and researchers of the past had a fundamentally different view of people than they do today?
- Today the definition of 'informed consent' remains murky. What did you learn about what it means or doesn't mean? What does it mean to you?
- In the years since the uniqueness of Henrietta Lacks's cells were discovered, others have been identified with cells that are valuable on the research market. In Chapter Five, Skloot details the history of John Moore, whose cells produced rare proteins, and Ted Slavin, whose cells produced valuable antibodies. All three cases are quite different in many ways, including how their doctors used the information. Should individuals be able to profit from their own cells? Should their doctors? With consent? Do you think Henrietta would have provided consent for her cells to be taken and used had she been asked?
- How do you think Zakariyya reacted to the completed book and to the way the family was depicted? How do you think Deborah would have reacted?
- One of the issues the book addresses is patient privacy. Henrietta completely lost hers long before the book was published, but also didn't get the fame her daughter, Deborah, thought she so richly deserved. Why does Deborah want fame for Henrietta?
- Skloot had to make a lot of choices about how she recounted Henrietta's story and how she structured the book. What do we know about her process from the foreword and endnotes? How does her narrative reconstruction of Henrietta's life impact the story? How do you feel about the reconstruction?
- Skloot recounts Deborah's abuse by Galen in Chapter 15. While difficult to read, it gives the reader important information about what Deborah has been through. Why

did Deborah think this part of her story was important to the overall narrative?
Does it change how you see Deborah? Her father, Day?

- Skloot tells several stories in this book: personal, family and scientific. How is she able to do this? In an interview with Booklist magazine (see the Go Big Read website), Skloot says she first heard of HeLa cells at the age of 16, when her own father was battling a viral infection with experimental drugs administered three to four times a week. Do you think her father's illness influenced her decision to pursue this story? Might his illness and treatment have influenced what threads she included in the book?
- Making health care affordable to all Americans has been a recent political focus. What does the story of Henrietta Lacks and her family add to this discussion?

***Jump*, by Elisa Carbone**

What would *you* do if you weren't afraid?

Rock-climbing is something P. K. and Critter have in common. Climbing is pleasure in movement; pleasure in balance; pleasure in defying gravity.

The other thing they have in common? They're running away. P. K. is running from her parents and their plan to send her to boarding school. Critter's escaping from a psychiatric ward.

They take turns telling the story of how they escaped, found each other, hitched west, and conquered Red Rocks, dodging bone-crushing falls on stony ascents. But when the cops come after Critter, P. K. has to decide: Should she believe this amazing guy she's trusted with her life, or believe the cops—who think he's out to *take* her life?

Discussion Questions

- P. K. wishes her parents would homeschool her. Would she be happier if she was homeschooled? Why do you think so?
- Critter believes "the things I see and touch ... are no more solid than the air. It is all illusion." He sees colorful auras around people. He says that time, matter, problems, and fear don't exist. Is this enough evidence to determine whether he's insane? Do you think he's insane? Why or why not?
- P. K. and Critter hardly know each other when they decide to run away together. They hitchhike, camp with minimal gear, and place their lives in each other's hands.

Have they been willing to take too much risk? What made each of them willing to risk so much? Were their decisions wise?

- Which character do you identify more with, P. K. or Critter? Why?
- Rock climbing in rugged Western mountains is central to this story. Could it be retold revolving around a different sport, or in a different setting? If your favorite sport or activity could be the common thread between P. K. and Critter, how would the story play out differently?
- Were you satisfied with the ending of *Jump*? Were you surprised? Describe how the book met your expectations—or failed to.

***The Mockingbirds*, by Daisy Whitney**

Alex didn't plan to wake up in any guy's bed, let alone this one's. She can't even remember his name. But here she is. Was it date rape?

There are no easy answers for Alex. She confronts her guilt feelings (she *had* had too much to drink), suffers Carter's boasts (oh, *that* was his name) and endures his friends' taunts. She despairs of the adults at Themis Academy offering her any solace or justice. The faculty simply refuses to believe Themis is anything less than perfect.

But she has steadfast friends, and they know of a campus group that serves up its own justice. Inspired by the book *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the Mockingbirds investigate, gather evidence, try, and punish fellow students. Will Alex dare to place her case—and her trust—with the Mockingbirds? And, if she does, will they find Carter guilty—or will they rule against Alex?

Discussion Questions

- Is Themis Academy the kind of place you would like to go to school? Why or why not? If you went to school there, what classes would be your favorites? Where would you hang out?
- Which characters do you identify with most? Least? Which ones would be your friends, if you attended Themis?
- Could the action of *The Mockingbirds* have taken place in a different type of school, instead of a boarding school?
- *The Mockingbirds* deals with date rape, which, according to the author, wasn't considered an important issue to universities as recently as the 1990s. Alex has to be persuaded that she was actually raped. Given the evidence as presented in the

book, was Alex raped? If you were on the jury, how would you have decided her case?

- Is the Mockingbirds' verdict and punishment justice, or is it revenge? How are those two concepts different?
- Will Alex be able to move on from her experiences in a positive way? What has she learned? Will Carter make different choices in the future?
- The Mockingbirds take their name from Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, in which Atticus Finch defends a clearly innocent black man against a charge of rape. Compare the two cases. Thinking about the other cases the Mockingbirds have considered, have they been respectful of the ideas presented in *To Kill a Mockingbird*?
- Why did Daisy Whitney choose *To Kill a Mockingbird* as the inspiration for her book?
- What do you feel you learned from the book?

***The Name of the Star*, by Maureen Johnson**

In this Doctor Who-ish supernatural thriller set in London, a teenager named Rory Deveaux arrives in London to attend boarding school. For Londoners, that day will be remembered as the day a series of brutal murders broke out across the city, gruesome crimes mimicking the horrific Jack the Ripper events of more than a century ago. Soon "Rippermania" takes hold of modern-day London, and the police are left with few leads and no witnesses. Except one. Rory spotted the man police believe to be the prime suspect. But she is the only one who saw him. Even her roommate, who was walking with her at the time, didn't notice the mysterious man. So why can only Rory see him? And more urgently, why has Rory become his next target? In this edge-of-your-seat thriller, full of suspense, humor, and romance, Rory will learn the truth about the secret ghost police of London and discover her own shocking abilities.

Discussion Questions

- How does Rory, from Louisiana, end up at a boarding school in London? What kind of relationship does she have with her parents? Do you think you would have made the same choices that she does?
- In the first few pages, Rory mentions that some of her Cajun relatives claim supernatural abilities. How does she feel about these relatives? What does she choose to reveal about them to her classmates, and why? Does this foreshadow the introduction of ghosts later in the story?

- When do you first realize that this story has a supernatural element? What are the earliest clues? How does the author gradually introduce ghosts into a modern, realistic story?
- What is the first assignment that makes Rory go to the library for research? What attitude do Rory and her friends have toward schoolwork? Is it the same as for students at your school? Why or why not?
- Other than Rory and the Ripper, which characters interested you most? Why? Do you think the author gave these characters enough attention? What would you have liked to know about them that you did not learn?
- Why have the actual Ripper murders fascinated so many people? Would this story have been as interesting if the killings in the story were not based on historical figures and events?
- We don't learn about the Shades group until we are well into the story. Why does the author wait to introduce the Shades? Is this effective?
- How will knowing the truth about her powers affect Rory's relationship with her friends? Her parents? Her teachers?
- What is the Ripper's actual name?
- Would *The Name of the Star* make a good movie? Why or why not?
- What character(s) did you identify most with? Why? What qualities do you have in common with that character or characters?

***Notes from the Blender*, by Trisha Cook and Brendan Halpin**

Take one desperately dateless guy with black shirt, black jeans, heavy black boots, and the weight of his mother's death in a car accident on his shoulders. Throw in one obsession with heavy metal and another with a pretty, popular gymnast who doesn't know his name but won't leave his hormone-powered dreams.

Add said girl with divorced parents, whose father is getting ready for a commitment ceremony with another guy and whose boyfriend is freaked out by said commitment ceremony. As in "I-think-we-should-see-other-people" freaked OUT.

Spice the mix with an unplanned baby. Toss in plenty of ice cubes—and hit "puree," for a smoothie of a stepfamily story.

Neilly and Declan don't have a lot in common. When she looks at him, she sees a "scrawny, scraggly-haired guy." He thinks she is soooooo hot, "I once saw her eating a Popsicle in the caf and had to go home for the rest of the day."

But then, Neilly and Declan discover they really *do* have something in common:

"It was just ... It was late at night, and we'd had some wine, and we just weren't thinking, you know, we'd been very careful for months, but then we just ... you're going to have a little sibling."

Yep. That's how Dec's dad broke it to him. Dec's dad, Neilly's mom. A baby on the way, and now—they're getting married.

It's enough to make Neilly and Dec wonder just who *are* the grown-ups here.

Discussion Questions

- When Roger suggests that Griffin take Neilly to the commitment ceremony, her instant reaction is "Just because my dad was marrying Roger didn't mean I had to play nice with his loser son." But Roger nails her with a look and says, "Neilly, Griff isn't who you think he is."
 - Who else isn't who you think? Do you like Declan at the beginning of the book? Neilly? Are there other characters that you size up quickly and decide "like" or "dislike" about?
 - As the story progresses, Dec and Neilly begin to appreciate each other for who they really are. Does your attitude toward each of them change? What other characters do you change your mind about, and why?
- Both main characters understand the irony of their parents having unprotected sex that results in a pregnancy. Declan remembers the class his father "made me take at church, where we ... learned about the responsible use of the divine gift that was our sexuality. ... And he'd gotten wasted and knocked up his girlfriend." How would you describe their feelings toward their parents when they learn about the pregnancy? Does this knowledge change their own ethics and attitudes about sexual relationships?
- Acceptance of differences might be one of the themes of *Notes From the Blender*. Should you always assume the best about someone who seems "different"?
- Would *Notes From the Blender* make a good movie? Why or why not?

***Now Is the Time for Running*, by Michael Williams**

Just down the road from their families, Deo and his friends play soccer in the dusty fields of Zimbabwe, cheered on by Deo's older brother, Innocent. It is a day like any other . . . until the soldiers arrive and Deo and Innocent are forced to run for their lives, fleeing the wreckage of their village for the distant promise of safe haven. Along the way, they face the prejudice and poverty that await refugees everywhere, and must rely on the kindness of people they meet to make it through. But when tragedy strikes, Deo's love of soccer is all he has left. Can he use that gift to find hope once more?

Relevant, timely, and accessibly written, *Now Is the Time For Running* is a staggering story of survival that follows Deo and his mentally handicapped older brother on a transformative journey that will stick with readers long after the last page.

Discussion Questions excerpted from the Educator's Guide provided by the publisher:

http://www.teachingbooks.net/agr.cgi?r=1&ri=21421&url_id=61215&i=&x=1

- Innocent is the older brother, but Deo usually behaves like one. What happened to Innocent when he was born? When does Deo come to his brother's rescue? When does Innocent return the favor?
- Take a closer look at the brothers' first name: Innocent and Deo. Research the meaning of Deo. Were the boys appropriately named? Is Innocent always innocent? Does Deo live up to his name? Why or why not?
- How did Innocent acquire his Bix-Box? Why is it so precious to him? What does he keep in it? When does the Bix-Box save the brothers? What happens to Innocent when he is separated from the Bix-Box?
- "Your grandfather is a survivor," says Deo's mother (page 12). "He survived his birth, the liberation war, running the white man's farm, and now old age—he can survive anything." Is she right about that? What is Grandpa Longdrop's final challenge? Who tries to save him?
- Zimbabwe is the home country of Innocent and Deo. From what you've read in the novel, what are the rights of the average citizens there? What reason does Commander Jesus give for his assault on Gutu? How do the villagers respond?
- What other options do you think they had?
- What motivates a man like Commander Jesus? Where do you think his cruelty comes from? How does he attract followers?
- What is Captain Washington's relationship to Innocent and Deo? Why can't he protect the brothers?
- Is Mai Maria a scoundrel or a savior? How does she help the boys get into South Africa? What does she demand as payment?
- Neither Deo nor Innocent know their father, a truck driver from South Africa. Why is Innocent so determined to find him? What is Deo's attitude about meeting his father?
- Why did the Flying Tomato farm seem like a paradise to Deo initially? When does he realize that it isn't? Why does he think Johannesburg will be a better place to live? What does Innocent believe?

- How did Deo and Innocent come to live under a bridge in Johannesburg? Who lives there with them? How is each person expected to contribute to the community?
- What is a *kwerekwere*? Why do many native South Africans dislike them? How are they treated? Are there *kwerekwere* in your town or city? How are they treated?
- Why does Innocent return to the bridge during the riot in Alexandra? What happens to him there? Were you surprised by this turn in the story? How does Deo respond?
- Why is soccer so important to Deo? How does the game make him feel? How did he acquire his playing skills? How does soccer save him from self-destruction?
- Who are Deo's soccer teammates? Where did they come from? What early experiences do they each share?
- The novel ends just as the final game of the Street Soccer World Cup begins. Which team do you think won? Why?
- Take another look at the title of this novel. What makes it so fitting for the story? What were the most important runs in Deo's life? Can he ever stop running? What do you think?

***Please Ignore Vera Dietz*, by A. S. King**

Eighteen-year-old Vera's spent her whole life secretly in love with her best friend, Charlie Kahn. And over the years, she's kept a lot of his secrets. Even after he betrayed her. Even after he ruined everything.

So when Charlie dies in dark circumstances, Vera knows a lot more than anyone—the kids at school, his family, or even the police. But will she emerge and clear his name? Does she even want to?

Discussion Questions from the author's website: <http://www.as-king.com/Please%20Ignore%20Vera%20Dietz%20Discussion%20Guide.pdf>

- When Vera saw Charlie (the 1000 Charlies), was he really there?
- Why do you think that the book was told from multiple perspectives? How did this add to the reader's understanding of the story? How would the story have been different if it was only told from Vera's perspective?
- Could Charlie and Vera ever have had a successful relationship? Why or why not?
- Do you think that Jenny Flick really hates Vera? Why or why not?
- Is Jenny Flick really all bad? Why or why not?
- Why do you think Vera drinks? Do you think that she is really an alcoholic? Is she a binge drinker? Is there a difference?
- What are Vera's fears? Are they justified? What are Vera's father's fears?

- Is Vera's dad a good dad? Was Vera's mom a bad mom?
- What does it mean to be a good parent? What does it mean to be a daughter? What does it mean to be a good friend? Who in this book was/wasn't a good parent/daughter/friend? Who redeemed himself/herself?
- Why does Vera want people to ignore her?
- What do the flow charts tell us? What do they show us? Why are they in the story?
- Why doesn't Vera call the police on the pervert who answers the door?
- Did Vera ever stop loving Charlie? Can Vera stop loving Charlie?
- Was there bullying in the book? What do you think the effects of bullying are? Short term? Long term?
- Why do you think the adults in the book seem to ignore everything? Do you think it's an accurate portrayal of real-life adults? Why or why not?
- What do you think will happen to Vera in the future?
- What was so significant about the Pagoda's story? Would the story have been the same without it, and how has the story benefitted from it?
- Why do you think the Pagoda tells us how many children in the town are hungry? What does this have to do with Vera's story?
- What role does domestic violence play in the story? Why do you think the author chose to make Charlie's parents the way they were? Do you think the violence at home affected Charlie? How? Why is that significant to the story?
- What was most surprising in this book?
- What do you feel you learned by reading the book?
- Regarding the abuse going on in Charlie's home: Why did neither Vera nor her parents report the abuse they witnessed and heard over the years? What concerns might they have had that stopped them? What do you think you would have done if you were in their situation? What resources can someone in Vera's family's situation utilize in such a situation?

A book trailer is available at <http://www.as-king.com/html/trailer.html>

***Ready Player One*, by Ernest Cline**

Year 2044 finds the world in crisis of epic proportions ... widespread war, famine, poverty, and disease accompany catastrophic climate change and energy crisis. To escape this bleak world, many people log on to OASIS, a virtual world and video game created by billionaire James Halliday. When Halliday dies, he leaves his entire estate to the person who can find the "Easter eggs" that he has hidden within OASIS. Teenager Wade Watts grows up with OASIS and even attends school via OASIS. Like the world around him, he is obsessed solving Halliday's puzzle and winning the fortune.

Discussion Questions

- What would your life be like if you found yourself living in Wade Watts' world of 2044?
- Compare today's technology with the technology of OASIS. Do you think the virtual world described could become a reality?
- Compare the social issues of the present day with the problems described in 2044. Do you think that the world of 2044 could be as dark as the one described in the book?
- What would you miss about going to school in the physical world if you were able to attend school like Wade did via OASIS? Why?
- What would you do with Halliday's fortune if you solved the puzzle?

***The Running Dream*, by Wendelin Van Draanan**

What would you do if you lost an essential part of yourself?

For sixteen-year-old Jessica, running is her life. When an accident takes her leg as well as the life of a fellow track mate, Jessica finds herself wishing their fates had been reversed. From taking showers to getting to classes, everything is harder with only one leg. How can Jessica ever be anything other than the one-legged girl? How can Jessica be excited about walking with a prosthetic limb when she was born to run? But with the support of her teammates, family and the friendship of a girl named Rosa, Jessica redefines what is essential in life.

The Running Dream is an inspirational story of what can happen when a community works together to overcome tragic circumstances. Overwhelmingly positive, this story is about seeing people for who they are and not what they look like.

Discussion Questions

- How does Jessica's life change because of the accident? How do you feel about Jessica's wish that she could have been Lucy?
- How do you think Jessica's story would have ended if she hadn't had a friend like Fiona? Would she still have gotten a running leg?
- At what point in the story do you begin to see Jessica feeling lucky for what happened to her?
- How does being a runner affect the rapidity of Jessica's physical recovery?
- Why do Jessica and Rosa become such good friends?
- Jessica's parents choose not to tell her about the insurance issues. Do you think they did the right thing? Why or why not?

- Compare how Jessica felt about Rosa at the beginning and end of the book. Why is it so hard to act naturally around someone with a physical disability?
- Even at the end of the story, you find that Jessica still has moments of weakness: "It's disturbing how fast weeds take root in my garden of worthiness." Do you think that this will ever change? Why or why not?
- We never get to see Jessica compete with her running leg. Why do you think the author stopped the story where she did?
- Do you think Jessica's story could happen in your school? Why or why not?

***The Sky Is Everywhere*, by Jandy Nelson**

Booktalk and Discussion Questions found at www.theskyiseverywhere.com

Seventeen-year-old Lennie Walker, bookworm and band geek, plays second clarinet and spends her time tucked safely and happily in the shadow of her fiery older sister, Bailey. But when Bailey dies abruptly, Lennie is catapulted to center stage of her own life—and, despite her nonexistent history with boys, suddenly finds herself struggling to balance two. Toby was Bailey's boyfriend; his grief mirrors Lennie's own. Joe is the new boy in town, a transplant from Paris whose nearly magical grin is matched only by his musical talent. For Lennie, they're the sun and the moon; one boy takes her out of her sorrow, the other comforts her in it. But just like their celestial counterparts, they can't collide without the whole wide world exploding.

Discussion Questions

- A major theme of this book is Lennie's discovery of her sexuality. Do you think this is depicted realistically? Do you think this is tied to her grief or do you think the two are unrelated?
- Throughout the novel, Lennie writes on anything and everything and leaves these poems scattered around the town. Do you think this is an effective way of showing the reader Lennie and Bailey's relationship? How do these poems ultimately bring Joe and Lennie together? What is the significance of Lennie's scattering these poems?
- Writing can be a form of therapy for some people. Do you think these poems are Lennie's way of finding an outlet for her grief? If so, what makes you think it works? Doesn't work?
- When Sarah hears about Lennie and Toby's relationship, she's upset by their actions. Do you agree with Sarah's reaction or should she have reacted differently,

knowing Lennie and Toby's situation? What is your opinion on Lennie and Toby's relationship? Do you find it forgivable or heartless?

- During one of her encounters with Toby, Lennie realizes, "I'm sure a shrink would love this, all of it." (pages. 146– 147) What does she mean by that? Do you agree with this assessment? Discuss whether you believe Lennie's actions in wearing Bailey's clothes and hooking up with her boyfriend are an act to keep Bailey close or to gain the life her sister had.
- Lennie and Bailey were extremely close sisters. Do you really believe no competition existed between them? Why or why not?
- Bailey and Lennie's absent mother is a large part of their lives. Ultimately the mystery leads Bailey to search for her. Why do you think she leaves Lennie in the dark about this? Who do you think is a stand-in for Lennie's real mother— Bailey or Gram? Why do you think Lennie decides not to continue with the search? Do you think she'll be content?
- Lennie's actions hurt Joe very deeply, on account of his relationship history. Do you think his reaction is extreme or understandable? Why do you think he forgives Lennie in the end?
- Consider the role music plays in the novel. How is this a crucial part of the story? Why does Lennie purposely throw the audition for first chair? How does music help her to heal? Is it just the music that draws Joe to Lennie or something more? How does it shape her relationship with Joe?
- The novel is saturated with grief. All of the people touched by Bailey in the novel— Gram, Big, Lennie, Toby, and Sarah—grieve in distinctly personal ways. Define their grief and how each character learns to move on, if at all. Do you wish any of the characters had worked through his or her grief in a different way? How would you have acted in their situation?

***Stick*, by Andrew Smith**

Fourteen-year-old Stark McClellan (nicknamed Stick because he's tall and thin) is bullied for being "deformed" – he was born with only one ear. His older brother Bosten is always there to defend Stick. But the boys can't defend one another from their abusive parents.

When Stick realizes Bosten is gay, he knows that to survive his father's anger, Bosten must leave home. Stick has to find his brother, or he will never feel whole again. In his search, he will encounter good people, bad people, and people who are simply

indifferent to kids from the wrong side of the tracks. But he never loses hope of finding love – and his brother.

Discussion Questions

- Stick describes himself as “unremarkable as canned green beans.” How would you describe him? How would Bosten describe him? His parents? Aunt Dahlia?
- How does the Lohmans’ family life compare to Stick and Bosten’s family? What are some differences between Aunt Dahlia’s home and the McClellan house? What are some differences between the two schools that Stick attended?
- What is Saint Fillan’s room and how does it play a part in the story? Why do you think Stick and Bosten had come to think this was normal?
- What are some of Stick’s coping strategies to deal with all the bad things that happen to him? What are some of Bosten’s coping strategies to deal with the bad things that happen to him? Compare and contrast the brother’s coping strategies.
- What do you think Stick and Bosten will be doing five years after the end of the book? Ten years?

***Stupid Fast*, by Geoff Herbach**

Felton Reinstein was the skinny, puny guy they called Squirrel Nut. That is, until Thanksgiving of his sophomore year, when suddenly he couldn’t stop eating and couldn’t wake up before noon and grew all that crazy hair.

And, he got fast. Stupid fast. So fast that, in the spring when gym class had to run the 600-yard dash for some physical fitness test thing, he beat all the other kids—even the fast kids—by about 150 yards.

Now Felton’s gone from joke to jock, but that hasn’t made his life any less complicated. His mother is severely depressed. His kid brother is acting stranger than usual, practicing piano and singing off-key for hours. And his best friend, Gus, is in Venezuela for the summer.

So when Aleah Jennings, a piano player even better than his brother, moves into Gus’s house, and Felton goes by on his paper route—he doesn’t even realize he might have a chance with her:

“I couldn’t help it; I set down my bike, walked to the door, pulled open the screen, and leaned my head in so I could watch her hit those keys. There was something sort of

angry and ferocious in the way she pounded that piano. ... My mouth was open and I was probably drooling."

Will Felton come to terms with his family's tragedy? Will he be able to hold his family together? Will he ever stop being hungry for the entire contents of the refrigerator? And, what will happen when summer's over and Aleah moves to Chicago?

Someday, he'll find out. Until then, he runs fast. Stupid fast.

Discussion Questions

- This book opens with a tragic suicide, yet within just a few pages, Felton says he wants to be a comedian. What was your reaction to this juxtaposition of tragedy and comedy? Does it make the book better, or does it detract from the story?
- Felton says he had always been good at sports, but until he reached puberty and became "ridiculously good," he had hidden his talent. Even after he joins the football team, Felton still has to remind himself, "I am big. I am huge. I am an athlete." Why is it so difficult for Felton to believe he is athletic?
- While Aleah says she practices piano so she can play for a thousand people who will "light up like Chinese New Year," Felton notices that he does not seek an audience for his running. Yet, they both agree that they practice for clarity. As Aleah says, "I know everything when I'm playing. Everything makes sense." Do these pursuits really seem to make things clearer for the characters? What do you do that brings things into such sharp focus for you?
- This book is written in Felton's "voice"—much of it in short, choppy sentences like thoughts running through his mind. Does it seem to be a realistic voice to you? Why or why not?
- Felton says his mother has "always been okay until this year." What are the reasons for Jerri's depression? Why does Felton feel responsible? How does he try to hold his family together? What should he have done differently?
- "I embrace weird," Aleah says after she and her father first meet Felton's mother and brother. Is Felton reassured? What does she mean? Do you "embrace weird"? Why or why not?

Evie is different. Not just her upbringing—though that’s certainly been unusual—but also her mindset. She’s smart, independent, opinionated, and ready to take on a new challenge: The Institution of School.

Yes, Evie has decided to forego her counterculture lifestyle long enough to spend her senior year in high school. As a sort of ethnographic research. Plus maybe just a tiny urge to have those universal experiences she’s seen in movies—boyfriends, best friends, detention, people getting stuffed in lockers, prom queens, and house parties.

It doesn’t take this homeschooled girl long to discover that high school is a whole new world, and not in the ways she expected. It’s a social minefield, and Evie finds herself confronting new problems at every turn: what, exactly, are the rules? Can’t you ignore social status and just ... be who you are? And what’s with all the hypocrisy?

Ever the idealist, Evie sets out to make changes. Big changes. But it turns out that The Man doesn’t always want you to fix The System. And that’s when she has to figure out answers to some of life’s great questions: Is love the One Unifying Truth? Is authority always dangerous? What’s wrong with labels? And what do you do when the revolution you started turns around to bite you in the butt?

Discussion Questions

- Each chapter opens with an inspirational and thought-provoking quote; what is the effect of having these quotes begin the chapter? Are they connected to the events that take place in that chapter? Which one is your favorite?
- How does Evie refer to her to mom? What does that reveal about their relationship?
- What happens to Evie when she captures the snake in Chapter 1?
- Why don’t the kids who help Evie when she sprains her ankle know who she is, even though they are all the same age and have lived in the same small town with just one high school?
- What does Raj call his car? Why?
- What Ivy League school does Evie hope to attend? What program is she interested in? Who else wants to go there?
- Evie and her mom live in a very unusual home. What type of house is it?
- Imagine how Evie must have felt going to a public school for the first time in her life. Are her complaints and concerns listed in her letter to the school newspaper justified? Does it make you think about your own experience in school?
- How did Evie convince her mom to let her attend public school?
- What is Evie’s favorite class? Why?
- What is the organization known as PLUTOs? Why was it created? What is the goal?

- How do the PLUTOs let people know that they have committed an infraction according to the PLUTO manifesto?
- Who is the first target of the PLUTOs? Why?
- Who is the second target? Why?
- Who is the third target? Why? How has the mission of the PLUTOs been changed?
- What does Evie learn about Jacinda's relationship with Mr. Brookner? How?
- Why do Evie and Raj fight? How has Raj betrayed her?
- Who does Evie discover has been leaving the school open so that students can place their own mean spirited lightning bolts? How does she threaten Evie?
- What role does Evie's mom play in Mr. Brookner's removal from the classroom?
- What idea does Evie have to bring the school back together? Does it work? What is the resolution?

What Can('t) Wait, by Ashley Hope Perez

Seventeen year-old Marisa Moreno has it hard...

She is the third child of Mexican immigrant parents who came to America for a better life. Her parents are hard-working and expect the same of Marisa. Mamí works twelve hour shifts at the bakery, so it's up to Marisa to cook breakfast in the morning for the men in the household, Papí and brother Gustavo. She is also stuck doing all the chores (her brother Gustavo basically does nothing). Her sister Cecilia got pregnant as a teen and married Jose. They are the parents of five-year-old Anita, who apparently does not go to school. Anita suffers through her parents' constant arguing, and comments made about her teeth. Tía Marisa is the only constant in her young life. Whenever Cecilia "leaves" Jose, Marisa is required to babysit.

Marisa works the evening shift at the local grocery store to provide additional income for the family and still needs time to do her homework. She is often too tired at night and too rushed in the morning to complete it, and her grades have started to slip. Marisa has been an excellent student, and as a result, she is on track to attend the University of Texas at Austin's engineering program.

Can things get any worse? Yes they can! She gets attacked by a bully; Papí demands more of her paycheck; Jose has a terrible accident at work; and Anita reverts to bedwetting. Find out how Marisa copes with her life choices and determines *What Can,* and *What Can't, Wait.*

- Throughout *What Can(t) Wait*, the author inserts Spanish words. How does the inclusion of the Spanish words add to the story?
- The word *Can(t)* figures prominently in the title of the novel, and learning to prioritize figures prominently in Marisa's future. What can wait? College? Work? Love? Marriage? What can't wait? Papi? Mami? Anita? School? Can you cite instances where prioritizing occurs, and why they are significant to the story as a whole?
- Marisa has two prospective paths ahead of her. What direction(s) would each take her in?
- Marisa often refers to father's, hers, Alan's, Brenda's. Do you think if her father were more supportive she would have to make the choices she does?
- Cecelia, Jose, and Gustavo don't seem to see how their behavior affects Marisa. What does this say about her? Is it that they don't know, or don't care?
- Marisa believes that devoting herself to school will allow her to escape her situation at home. Does school always live up to her expectations? Where do you think it fails her? How does it help her succeed? Can you imagine the same character without the academic talent? How would her life be different? What would remain the same? Is Marisa right to believe that all of her potential lies in her talent for school?
- Think about other immigrant stories. How is Marisa's story universal? How is it unique? How does Marisa's Mexican-American story compare to other immigrant stories? Would it change if she were from a different country or culture?
- Marisa lives in a heavily populated Mexican-American community. Is anything about her circumstance surprising to you? How has reading *What Can(t) Wait* affected your views regarding the status of women in immigrant populations? Does this apply to your own community?
- When do you think the story is set? Do you think immigrant experiences are much different today? What has changed? What has remained the same?
- Marisa does not tell her parents or anyone about Pedro and the assault. Later we discover he is Big Man on Campus, not just a bully. Do you know anyone like this? How do you interact with them?

***What Comes After*, by Steve Watkins**

Iris finds herself feeling very alone in the world after her father passes away. Her best friend's parents decide she can no longer stay with them even though they had promised Iris' dying father that they would care for her. Shuffled off to live with a cruel aunt she had only "seen" once as a baby, Iris finds herself living on a goat farm in North Carolina. Even though Aunt Sue and her son Book are abusive to Iris, she finds comfort in working with the goats on the farm. Like her father, who had been a

veterinarian, Iris loves animals. When Aunt Sue orders Book to butcher three of the goats, Iris is desperate to save them. The result is the brutal beating that begins the story.

Discussion Questions

- When you read the newspaper article “Mother, Son Accused in Beating” what details stood out in your mind? Did this introduction make you want to read the book? Why or why not?
- If you had a friend that was being physically or verbally abused by someone what would you do? Whom would you tell? What would you tell your friend?
- When you meet the foster family (the Tuetens) what is your first impression? How does your first impression compare to how you feel about the Tuetens at the end of the book?
- What do you think might have happened to the goats if Iris had told Mr. and Mrs. Tueten the truth about taking care of the goats?