

# GREAT PICKS FOR YOUR MIDDLE GRADE BOOK CLUB



Featuring booktalks, thematic discussion questions, and tips on how to run a successful book club for young readers!



# HERE IN THE REAL WORLD

by Sara Pennypacker

## Booktalk

Ware and Jolene each have plenty of secrets when they meet by chance—secrets they keep from one another and maybe even from themselves. When Ware enters the grounds of an abandoned church, to escape the dreaded Recreation Center program his parents insist he attend, he finds a condemned property and a strange, lonely girl growing an unlikely garden. Ware’s natural shyness gradually

disappears as he recognizes a way to turn the crumbling building into the castle of his imagination and as Jolene’s situation starts to arouse his curiosity. How can two crazy dreams come together for a couple of wary kids who desperately need a trusted friend but are afraid to trust each other?

## Questions for Group Discussion

**Family and Friendship.** Compare the challenges that Ware and Jolene face in each of their families. Why does Ware feel guilty about his grandmother’s fall? Why is he not curious about Jolene’s family at first? Discuss the part that Uncle Cy plays in Ware’s growth during the summer. How does Walter help Ware to feel better about his life? In what ways does Mrs. Stavros help Jolene? Why does Ware’s grandmother want Jolene to visit her again? It is often said that friends are the family we choose for ourselves. Discuss how this is true for Ware and Jolene and other characters in this book.

**Chivalry and Heroism.** Why is Ware’s school report on knighthood so important to him? Why does his mother dismiss its importance when he shows it to her? Make a list of the rules of chivalry that Ware cites from his report and identify places in the story when Ware acts on these codes of knighthood throughout the summer. Why do you think learning about life in the Middle Ages appeals to Ware? Discuss ways in which Ware, Jolene, and Ashley each act heroically in the course of this story. Which of the adults would you consider a hero in the story?

**Fairness.** Why does Jolene say that Ware lives in “Magic Fairness Land” (pg. 78)? Why does he accuse her of not being “fair” in that same chapter? Discuss the meaning of the word for each of them, as it relates to their work in the churchyard and to the world in general. What does fairness mean to

Ashley as it relates to the natural world? What does Mrs. Sauer mean when she tells Ware: “That simply wasn’t fair to you” (pg. 227)? How does she change her attitude toward him and why? Identify parts of this story when you feel the characters are not being treated fairly.

**Purpose and Repurpose.** How does Ware’s uncle help him to develop a purpose during the summer? What does Cy mean when he tells Ware he is an intuitive filmmaker? Why is Jolene obsessed with recycling: “Everything was something else before and will be something else after” (pg. 171)? How does her statement relate to the ruined churchyard? How does it relate to people? Discuss Ware’s declaration to his mother: “I am a person leading a purpose-driven life” (pg. 233). How do Ware’s parents react to his new purpose for their backyard?

**The Real World.** What is the meaning of the book’s title? Why does Mrs. Sauer say that Ware is “off in his own world” when his grandmother falls? (pg. 6) Why does Jolene think Ware doesn’t live “here in the real world” (pg. 78)? What are the hardest parts of the real world for Ware to accept? What is the hardest part of the real world for Jolene? How do their activities in the churchyard help them both? How does looking through a film camera lens help Ware to focus on what is important in the real world?

Guide created by Connie Rockman, Youth Literature Consultant.



# FROM THE DESK OF ZOE WASHINGTON

by Janae Marks

## Booktalk

Zoe Washington has a lot going on in her life this summer. She is an enthusiastic baker who wants to compete on the Food Network show *Kids Bake Challenge!* She's not speaking to Trevor, her best friend and next-door neighbor. She receives a letter from her father, who she's never met, from prison. This summer Zoe has to manage all of that and somehow fix it all. Will she be able to apply for the television show? Will she and Trevor repair their friendship? Will she be able to prove her father's innocence and get him out of prison? Zoe Washington has a summer packed with delicious sweet treats and detective work!

## Questions for Group Discussion

**Secrets.** When is it appropriate to keep secrets? Who do secrets help or hurt? A secret is uncovered when Zoe receives a letter from Marcus Johnson, her biological father. Why does Zoe hide her only picture of Marcus? As Zoe reads Marcus's letter, what does she discover? What is the secret that her mother has been keeping from Zoe? Why does Zoe (and eventually her grandma) keep her correspondence with Marcus a secret? Is it appropriate to keep this secret from Zoe's mom? Reflect on Zoe's thoughts: "All of the lying was wrong. I knew that. But maybe it was okay to do something wrong if you were doing it for the right reason" (p. 180).

**Music.** Zoe and Marcus exchange letters. In them, Marcus shares song titles that remind him of her and other songs that tell her more about him. What can someone's music choices tell us about that person? If you were making a playlist for one of your family members, what songs would you choose? How would those song choices differ if you were making a playlist for a friend? What songs would you choose for a playlist that reminds you of key moments in your own life? Why did you select those songs?

**Goals.** Consider Zoe's statement: "I never saw many Black pastry chefs on the shows I watched, or in the cookbook section of the library, but I was still determined to be one when I grew up" (pg. 35). How does seeing people who look like you in media and books affect the kind of goals you set for yourself? What does this say about the importance of representation?

**Friendship.** Zoe was mad at Trevor for a long time. What finally makes Zoe decide to tell him why? What does their conversation reveal about the ways different people can interpret the same events? What does communication have to do with friendship? Have you had an experience when a friend was angry with you, and you didn't know why? How did you patch up the friendship?

**Advocacy.** What does Zoe begin to discover as she reads *The Wrongfully Convicted* at the library? How does this change her perspective on justice and the prison system? What do many of the innocent people in prison have in common? Why do you think this happens? What is the Innocence Project?

Guide prepared by Shanetia P. Clark, Associate Professor of Literacy, Salisbury University.



# COO

by Kaela Noel

## Booktalk

Coo has grown up with her flock. She knows that even though she is a human and they are pigeons, they are her family and she belongs. But everything changes the day Burr, the pigeon who means the most to Coo, is injured. Coo ventures off the roof, her safe world, into the unknown to get Burr help. That's how she meets Tully, a healer who cares about the pigeons and comes to care for

Coo. When Tully brings Coo to live with her after a storm, Coo must navigate for the first time away from her flock and on the ground. As Coo learns to spread her wings in this new world and discover who she is without leaving her past behind, she also learns to face her fears as she finds new friends and more family to help her soar.

## Questions for Group Discussion

**Family.** At the beginning, Coo's only family is her flock. How is she like her flock? How is she different from them? What do you imagine growing up with the flock was like for Coo? Eventually, Tully takes in Coo and becomes like family to her too. What do Tully and the flock have in common? How does Coo act like a family with Tully in ways that are different than how she acts with the flock? What about ways that are the same? Neither Tully nor the flock are related to Coo by blood. They are both "found families" for her. What are the things that make Coo and the flock a family? What are some ways Coo and Tully are like a family? How would you define what a family is?

**Freedom.** Coo can't fly, so until she can climb down, she is stuck on the roof. But are there ways she is more free than her flock? In what ways is Coo dependent on the flock? Does this make her more or less free? What does freedom mean to Coo? Does that change over the course of the story? What does freedom mean to the pigeons? Is it different than what humans think of as freedom? What does freedom mean to you?

**Belonging.** Coo isn't sure she belongs on the ground, but she's also not sure she's like her flock. What are some things that make Coo feel like she belongs? Does her friendship with Aggie change how she feels? How does Coo find out where she belongs? Do you think it's possible to feel like you belong in more than one place? Where do you feel like you belong the most? How does seeing and being with the people we love make us feel like we belong somewhere?

**Nature.** The mayor seems to think that the pigeons make the city a more unpleasant place. What do you think of the mayor's plan to "clean up" the city? If it's the right thing to do, why is he being secretive about it? What are some natural spaces around where you live? Do you know about the kinds of animals that live there? In cities, pigeons are a common sight and they do eat the trash that humans produce. Some people think of pigeons as pests or nuisances. But others are like Tully and Nicolas and care about pigeons. Have you seen pigeons before? Did you have some ideas about what pigeons were like before you read this book? Did they change after you read the book?

**Helping Others.** At first, Tully refuses Lucia's help because she is afraid of what might happen if Lucia finds out the truth about Coo. What does she do to try to avoid help from Lucia? When Lucia does find out the whole story, does she react the way Tully thinks she will? Do you think Tully should have asked for help sooner? What advice would you have given Tully if she had told you Coo's story? Just like Tully is afraid to tell Lucia the truth, Coo is afraid to tell Aggie the truth. Why? When Coo does tell Aggie the truth, how does Aggie help her? What are some ways you help friends when they come to you with their problems? What are some of the best ways your friends have helped you?

Guide created by Angie Manfredi. Angie is a writer and librarian who worked with children and teens directly for 11 years. She now works in library consulting on all things youth services. She's fat and not sorry about it and is passionately committed to giving kids reading choice and decolonizing the discourse around children's literature.



# A HOME FOR GODDESSES AND DOGS

by Leslie Connor

## Booktalk

Lydia has lost everything that matters to her. Her mother just died, and her father disappeared long ago. Now the eighth grader must leave home and move to another state to live with her aunt and her aunt's wife. How can she be sure that they will keep her? Lydia tries to be chipper even when she's sad. She helps with their new rescue dog even though she's not a dog person. And she cheerfully

goes on walks with two friendly girls from school even when she'd rather be alone. But as a long cold winter turns into spring, things start to change—maybe for the better. Now Lydia must face a hard question: Is it time to share her secrets before they come between her and her chance to be happy again?

## Questions for Group Discussion

**Loss.** Lydia has experienced great loss. What did Lydia lose, besides her mother, due to her mother's illness? How did she cope with those losses? When the book opens, how is she dealing with her mother's death? Lydia must adjust to a new home. How does she feel about moving in with Aunt Brat and the others? Why is she so intent on being helpful? How does she change over time? How do those around her, including Guffer, help her? How is Guffer's story parallel to hers in terms of loss and change? Discuss how pets can help people, drawing from your own knowledge and experience.

**Helping Others.** After the goats come to live in their barn, Lydia says about Aunt Brat and Eileen, "Creatures in need were part of their glue as a couple" (pg. 311). She notes that she, too, is glue for them. How do the goats form a bond between Aunt Brat and Eileen? How does Lydia affect their bond? What other rescued creatures are important to them, and why? What is it about helping others that brings Aunt Brat and Eileen closer? Where else in the story are people helpful, and why? Why does helping others feel good? Who in your life tries to help others?

**Community.** When Lydia lived with her mother, especially in the last two years, she was largely isolated. Because of this, the sense of community in Chelmsford is new to her. What does it mean to have a sense of community? What are some of the ways Chelmsford feels like a community? How do her fellow students welcome her? How do Florry and Gwen contribute to the sense of community? How does Lydia feel about her new community at first, and how

does that change? How could you add to a sense of community in your school or neighborhood?

**Secrets.** When Aunt Brat is talking to Lydia about the goats, which she has kept a secret from Eileen, she says, "Secrets are a burden" (pg. 286). Do you think Aunt Brat was right to keep the information from Eileen? What are some of the secrets that Lydia is keeping from the adults in her life, why did she keep them secret, and why do they feel like burdens? How do the adults in her house find out about her secret gallery for the goddesses? What happens with her secret about her father's cards? Discuss when secrets might be a good thing and when they might be a mistake, using examples from your own experience if relevant.

**Strong Women.** From the title onward, the novel celebrates goddesses and women. How has Lydia's life always been dominated by women? When Lydia, Aunt Brat, and Eileen go out to confront Mr. Capperow, Lydia describes them as "three women running" (pg. 349). When they link arms to walk back to the house, she says, "I held my women up; they held me up" (pg. 352). Discuss that statement and its broader meaning. What is the role of goddesses in Lydia's life now versus in the past? What kind of strength do the different goddesses represent? What type of strength do different females in the novel show, including Lydia, and how?

Guide prepared by Kathleen Odean, a school librarian for more than 15 years, who now gives workshops for educators about new books for children and teens. Kathleen chaired the 2002 Newbery Award Committee and served on earlier Caldecott and Newbery Award Committees.

## TIPS FOR ORGANIZING A BOOK GROUP:

- The fastest way to advertise is through word of mouth. Recruit a few enthusiastic readers who are willing to get things started!
- Give participants options and let them decide. Pull a list of potential books and share information about them with your readers.
- Come prepared with a few good questions, but let them drive the discussion. Begin each meeting by letting the kids introduce themselves and share their thoughts and initial impressions about the book. Let their conversation about the book start organically and use the questions if and when you need them.
- Don't be afraid of silence. It can be scary to speak up for the first time—especially if you're new to the group—so don't feel the need to fill the silence with chatter. The quiet gives them some time to think about how to answer a question you offered or to build up the courage to say something.
- Be ready with information about the next book club selection before they leave!

Tips provided by Cindy Minnich, a high school English teacher and certified school librarian in Pennsylvania.

## MORE DISCUSSION-WORTHY TITLES



### **Efrén Divided**

Ernesto Cisneros

★ “Honest and tender: a must-read.”  
—*KIRKUS REVIEWS* (starred review)



### **Catherine's War**

Julia Billet; illus. by Claire Fauvel

★ “Lyrical . . . beautifully detailed.”  
—*BOOKLIST* (starred review)



### **The Best at It**

Maulik Pancholy

★ “This funny, uplifting story about identity . . . sends a powerful, positive message to young readers about choosing self-acceptance.”  
—*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY* (starred review)



### **Dear Sweet Pea**

Julie Murphy

★ “With gentle humor, ageless wisdom, and charming, genuine characters who represent a diversity of experiences, Murphy's novel offers all the emotional highs and lows of pitch-perfect middle grade.”  
—*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY* (starred review)



### **My Jasper June**

Laurel Snyder

★ “A beautiful story about the healing powers of friendship in the face of tragedy and hardship, this is a must-buy for juvenile fiction collections.”  
—*SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL* (starred review)