

Reading Group Guide for

Alone

By Megan E. Freeman

About the Book

Twelve-year-old Maddie Harrison can't wait for the secret sleepover she has planned with her two best friends. No parents, no younger brothers, just lots of junk food and classic movies. But then Maddie's friends cancel on her at the last minute. Worse yet, her exciting night out has terrible, unintended consequences when her entire town is evacuated because of a mysterious threat. Maddie is left behind with only a rottweiler named George to keep her company. She must learn to survive in a world without any of the people or modern conveniences she's depended on her whole life. Over the course of more than three years, Maddie faces challenges she never could have imagined—from wild dogs to tornadoes—and must dig deep to find the strength and courage to survive. Will her parents come back for her, or will she be alone forever?

Discussion Questions

1. At the start of the book, Maddie plans a secret sleepover because she wants freedom and time away from her family. How does she end up feeling about being apart from her family after she's left behind? Do you think Maddie gets the kind of freedom she was seeking when she's living alone? Why or why not?
2. Maddie decides to stay put in her town after she's abandoned, instead of searching for help. Later in the book, she decides not to reveal herself to the looters. How does she come to these decisions? Do you agree with her choices? Why or why not? How would you have reacted in these situations if you were Maddie?
3. Before the evacuation, Maddie helps her brother write an essay about the challenges facing the main character of *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, who is left alone on an island for eighteen years. Maddie thinks the character's biggest challenge is finding food and shelter. Is this what Maddie finds most challenging when she is alone herself? What do you think would be most challenging for you?
4. What personality traits and skills does Maddie have that help her survive alone? What skills does she have to learn? What traits and skills do you have that would help you survive a similar situation? What information would you want to seek out?
5. At first, Maddie is sure that her parents will come back and rescue her at any moment. At what point does she realize this is not likely? How does she change after that realization? Explain your answers using examples from the book.
6. After the power goes out and Maddie's cell phone stops working, she says, "It's weird / not having a device / to turn to / with every urge / to text someone / go somewhere / know something." Do you have a cell phone or other device? If yes, how would you feel if you suddenly couldn't use them anymore? If no, what are some advantages or disadvantages of not having a device? Do you think there are any benefits to being disconnected? Why?

7. What does Maddie miss most about her family and friends after they're gone? Describe the emotions she's feeling. Do you think she's surprised by any of her reactions? What do you think you would miss most about your family and friends if you were suddenly separated from them?

8. Why do you think the author chose to tell this story in verse? What differences do you notice when reading poetry versus prose? What did you like most about reading a story in this format? Were there things that were challenging?

9. The author gives clues to Maddie's emotions and mental state through sentence structure. For example, in the section "Nothing Makes Any Kind of Sense," she chooses to use very short sentences. Read these pages aloud. Do the short lines change how you read it? Can you find other places in the book where the author also uses this style? What impact might this have on readers, and what does it indicate about the narrative? Now think about a common feature often used in poetry: repetitive words and phrases. Read the section titled "Panic" aloud and answer the same questions as above.

10. Maddie's only companion during her time alone is a dog, George. Why do you think Maddie takes George in, even though it's extra work to find food for him? What do you think humans gain from sharing their lives with cats, dogs, and other animals? Do you have a pet that helps you when times get tough? If you don't have a pet, what pet would you choose if you did have one? Why?

11. After getting library books for the first time, Maddie says, "We load up our treasure and head for home." Why are the books so valuable to her? Are there any books that have been treasures to you in your life? What are they, and why are they so important to you?

12. On Maddie's first birthday alone, she realizes that "Childhood is over . . . It's time to get serious." Why do you think she realizes this now? How does her behavior change after this moment?

13. When Maddie first starts taking food and supplies from other people's houses, she leaves thank you notes with her name and address. Why do you think she does this even though the entire town has been abandoned? Why does she eventually stop leaving these notes?

14. After more than a year alone, Maddie says, "I would give anything / to have a real, live grown-up / take over all the worry and fear and work / that I've been doing for the past year / and just let me fall apart." How do you think Maddie finds the strength to go on despite her exhaustion and anxieties? Have you ever felt overwhelmed by your responsibilities? Have you ever asked someone for help? How did that make you feel?

15. When Maddie comes across men who are looting, she says, "All of my thoughts are / questions. None of them / are thoughts." What do you think she means by this? Have you ever felt like this before? Do you have any strategies for calming yourself enough to think clearly when you're feeling confused and overwhelmed? What advice might you give to Maddie?

16. Throughout the book, Maddie alternates between living at her mom's house and at her dad's. These are the places she called home when her family was with her, but she now says that "Empty houses aren't home." Why don't these houses feel like home to Maddie anymore? What do you think makes a home?

17. When Maddie's mom's house burns down, she says, "I don't know what to save. / family photos? / artwork on the walls?" What do you think she should have tried to save? What do you think she means when she asks, "What meaning does any of it have if / no one ever comes back again"?

18. Maddie eventually comes to believe that her parents have not come back for her because they didn't survive whatever caused the evacuation. She says, "my grief and loneliness / are no longer burdened by hope / that things will change." What does she mean by being "no longer burdened by hope"? How does Maddie change after this realization? Did those changes surprise you?

19. Maddie is left alone after her entire state is evacuated due to political unrest. Do you think something like this could ever happen in real life? If so, what do you think governments and citizens could do now to prevent it? Explain your answers.

20. Compare the Maddie at the start of the book to the Maddie at the end. How has she changed? How is she still the same? Give specific examples from the novel to support your answers.

21. Did the ending of the book surprise you? Why or why not?

22. Do you think Maddie and her friends Emma and Ashanti would still be close if they were reunited after Maddie's years alone? Have you ever had an experience that changed your relationship with one of your friends? If so, are you still friends with that person? What kind of conversations did you have to get through it?

Extension Activities

1. Once Maddie uses up the food and other supplies in her parents' houses, she has to go out searching for what she needs to survive in other places. Imagine you've been left totally alone like Maddie. Make a list of everything you would need to stay alive and the things you would need to comfort and entertain you, like Maddie's library books. Then write where you would find each of these items. If you'd like, draw a map of your town detailing where you'd find the things you'd need, such as grocery stores, gas stations, lakes, sources of wood for heat, and the library.

2. In the sections "Trapped" and "Rope," Maddie is almost washed away in a flood. Read these aloud and think about how the author uses the poems' forms to express Maddie's emotions. Consider the length of lines, repeated words, line breaks, divisions of stanzas, etc. Then, write your own poem about a frightening or emotional experience you've had. Try to use the form of your poem to help the reader understand your experience.

3. Maddie is able to survive partly because of skills she learned from her dad, like recognizing venomous snakes. She also learns new skills, such as how to garden, from books she checks out of the library. Choose a survival skill you'd like to learn. Maybe it's how to build a fire, make a shelter in the woods, grow a garden, or navigate using a map and compass. Learn how to develop that skill. You can find books at the library like Maddie does, use the internet, or even find a class or mentor such as a parent or scout leader to teach you. Then make a poster to help others learn how to do the skill, too.

4. During her time alone, Maddie finds comfort in the poetry she reads. Some of the poets she mentions are Emily Dickinson, Mary Oliver, e.e. cummings, and Billy Collins. Read a poem or two by each of these authors. You can find them on the internet or at your local library. Which is your favorite? Write an

essay explaining how that particular poem or one of these poets relates to your life.

5. Maddie calls the books she gets out of the library “treasure” because they help her learn new skills and pass the long hours, months, and years alone. Make a “hard times” booklist for Maddie that includes books you think could help comfort her and lift her mood. For each book, write a brief description of why you think it would be a good book to read during a difficult time.

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