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COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used in writing prompts for independent work.



Sunshine

Marion Dane Bauer

About the Book

Since as far back as Ben can remember, it's been him, his devoted dad, and Sunshine—Ben's little dog, who rarely leaves Ben's side. It was Mom who did the leaving, and Ben's about to spend a whole week with his suddenly present mother in the wilds of northern Minnesota. On the remote island she calls home, Ben will learn to canoe, weather the elements, and weigh a burning question: when will she come back to where she belongs?

Set in the northern Minnesota wilderness, this timeless novel about a boy and his imaginary dog explores the legacy of guilt and blame—and what really constitutes a family.

About the Author

Marion Dane Bauer is a prolific author who has written novels, easy readers, early chapter books, nonfiction, and picture books. Her novel *On My Honor* was named a Newbery Honor Book, and her most recent picture book, *The Stuff of Stars*, won the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award for artist Ekuia Holmes. She has also been a teacher of both teens and adults, most recently as one of the founding faculty of the Vermont College of Fine Arts MFA program in Writing for Children and Young Adults. She lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, with her partner.



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Discussion Questions

1. On the second page, we learn that it has been a long time since Ben has seen his mom. How did you feel about that?
2. On page 11, Ben wonders, "How can you forget somebody so completely and yet recognize every bit?" How would you answer Ben's question?
3. Sunshine came into Ben's life when he was three, just after his mother left. Why do you think that happened?
4. How would you describe Ben's mother and her life? Why do you think she chose that kind of life? Would you like to live like that? Why?
5. Ben reveals early in the book that he knows that Sunshine is not real, yet he treats her as if she were. He calls her, pats her, and even tries to save her life when he "sees" her go bounding down to visit a baby bear whose mother is close by. That last action could have cost him his life. How do you explain the difference between what he knows is true and what he thinks is true?
6. Had you ever heard of a daemon before? What kind of an animal would you choose for a daemon?
7. Ben sometimes feels embarrassed about things he does, such as saying to his mother "I'm very glad to meet you" or mistaking the call of loons for wolves. His mother laughs when he does these things, and he is both embarrassed and angry. How did you feel about her reactions?
8. Ben worries a lot about being a scaredy-cat and a "what-if kid." Did you think he was unusually timid, or did his fears seem normal and understandable?
9. Making up stories is one of the things that Ben does to amuse himself and pass the time. How do his stories relate to his real life?
10. Do you like to make up stories? What kinds of things happen in your stories? On page 102, Ben's mother says, "I can't think of much that's more important than the stories we tell ourselves." What do you think she means by that?



11. Ben has one week to make his wish come true. What did you think would happen as a result of this week?
12. Ben's parents are very different kinds of housekeepers. Ben's dad is very neat and cleans the house from top to bottom every week, while his mother's cabin is "messy, just plain messy" (page 35). Do these details tell you anything about their characters? Are you messy or neat?
13. Several times during this book, Ben says that Sunshine has left him. For instance, when Ben has taken the canoe out by himself and he leaves the island where he saw bears, Sunshine does not go with him. He thinks, "So Sunshine has decided to leave him. Why should he care? Let her do what she wants" (pages 113–114). What is happening here?
14. When Ben and his mother watch the island fire while moored offshore in her canoe, Ben sees that the fire is simultaneously beautiful and terrible. How can something be both? Can you think of anything else that is both?
15. Sunshine doesn't appear in the canoe while they are waiting. "She might as well have burned up in the fire. . . . He knows, of course, it's not possible for an imaginary dog to burn up in a real fire. But maybe what happened is even worse. Maybe she burned up in his mind" (pages 170–171). How could that have happened?
16. Ben is afraid that the island burned because of the fire he made when he was lost, but his mother thinks it was probably because of a lightning strike. Which do you think it was? Does it matter?
17. Do you think Ben's mother did the right thing in leaving him when he was three? Do you think her own abusive childhood influenced her decision? What do you think she should have done?
18. Were you surprised that Ben wants to return to the island next summer? Would you want to?

These questions were prepared by Grace Worcester, a former youth services consultant for the Vermont Department of Libraries. She has served on the Newbery Medal, Caldecott Medal, *Boston Globe–Horn Book Award*, and National Book Award for Young People's Literature committees.

