

DISCUSSION GUIDE

ALL THE SMALL WONDERFUL THINGS

KATE FOSTER



For readers ages 8–12
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At home, Alex's best friend is Kevin the cockapoo, although what he wants most of all is a friend at school. But that is harder to find than he ever expected. A touching story about learning that friendship isn't one size fits all and is often found where you least expect it.

Everything is changing for eleven-year-old Alex, and as an autistic person, change can be terrifying. With the first day of secondary school only a few months away, Alex is sure that having a friend by his side will help. So he's devised a plan: impress the kids at school by winning a trophy at the PAWS Dog Show with his trusty sidekick, Kevin. This should be a walk in the park . . . right?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate Foster works as a literary agent and writes children's books about friends, family, and dogs. Originally from the southeast of England, she now lives on the beautiful Gold Coast of Australia with her family and rescue dogs. She loves eating cake, reading books, and watching cooking shows on TV!



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Discussion Questions

Emotions/Anxiety

“I don’t always have to attend assemblies because sometimes the noise and all the people give me too much anxiety, and my coping beaker fills up too quickly for me to control with breathing or tell anyone in time” (page 148). Consider the idea of a “coping beaker.” What things fill up Alex’s beaker and why? What strategies does he use when his beaker is full, and how do his strategies change throughout the novel? What things might fill up your own coping beaker? What do you do when you’re feeling like this, and what are some other ways you could cope with these feelings?

“I feel sad and tired inside and also on the outside, but I don’t tell Mum because my head and my words are the most tired” (pages 120–121). Why might it sometimes be challenging for Alex to identify his emotions and communicate how he’s feeling to others? Do you ever find this difficult? As a group, discuss some things you could try to help express yourself when you’re feeling upset or overwhelmed.

Relationships/Social skills

What social skills does Alex have? What social skills does Alex learn in this story? How do these change his relationships? What is the author saying is most important in relationships?

How do the following relationships change from the beginning of the story to the end?

- Alex and Derek
- Alex and Jared
- Alex and Angel
- Alex and his mum
- Alex and Ned
- Alex’s mum and Derek’s mum

“Jared’s giving me the look. I’m pretty good at recognizing the signs now” (page 3). At the start of the novel, Alex is talking to Jared about *OrbsWorld*, and because of his Be Aware classes, he can tell Jared isn’t interested. What are some examples of the social cues and visual signs Alex is referring to? How does Alex respond?

Does Alex act differently when he feels like someone is interested in what he has to say?

Do you think the way you listen to someone can affect how well they can communicate?

Who in your life makes you feel as though you can really express yourself? Do you think you are a good listener? How can you become a better listener?

Why do you think Alex’s connection with his dog Kevin is so important to him, and how is it different from the relationships he has with people?

Friendship

“You know, it’s not important to have lots of friends, Alex. It’s the quality that counts” (page 122). What does friendship look like to Alex, and how does he decide who is and isn’t a friend? How does Alex’s mum try to help him to think about friends differently? Do you agree with how she explains her experience of friendship? Why or why not?

When we first meet Alex, he wants more than anything else to make a friend, but he finds it very difficult. What does Alex think he can do to befriend Jared and the other kids? Do you think his plan works? Why or why not? What are some other ways Alex could have tried to make friends?

In what ways do Derek and Angel show Alex that they are his friends? Why might it have been important to Alex to hear them refer to themselves as his friends out loud too? Do you think Alex will find it easier to make more new friends in secondary school? Why or why not?

Autism

People who have autism are born with brains that are wired differently. Sometimes the wiring is a little different, and sometimes it’s very different. You can’t tell by looking at a person how different their brain’s wiring is, or even whether they have autism. There have always been people with autism and there always will be.



What kinds of support do you see Alex getting at school and at home? Do you think Alex needs extra support? If so, what kind and why? Think of times in your life when you have needed support (as a baby, at school) and what kinds of support you needed (for example, physical, educational, or emotional). Think of times when you might need support in the future (such as when you're old, when you're learning something new or starting a new job, after an accident, or when you go through a challenging time). Think of examples of times when you have given support. What can be good and what can be bad about giving and receiving support?

At the beginning of the novel, what expectations and pressure does Alex put on himself? How does this affect him? How does he change this by the end of the novel?

As a group, try this activity, which might help you to understand how Alex feels when his senses get overwhelmed.

- Close your eyes: What can you hear? What can you smell? What can you see (even though your eyes are closed)? What can you feel? Now imagine there's a volume knob on all of your senses, and turn it all the way up. Imagine the sounds are louder, your sweater is scratchier, etc.
- What might it be like if you felt this way all the time? How could it change your actions and reactions?

All the Small Wonderful Things is told in first person, from Alex's perspective. What insight did it give you into how Alex and other people who have autism might feel? How would *All the Small Wonderful Things* be different if it were told in third person?

Author Q&A

***All the Small Wonderful Things* is your first book! What was your writing experience like? What's your advice to kids who want to be authors?**

Yes! It's so exciting! I've been writing for a long time, since I was very little, and over the many years, I've worked hard on building up my skills and knowledge and understanding of the important elements a great story needs to stand out. *All the Small Wonderful Things* is the very first contemporary story I've ever written—most that came before were either sci-fi or horror—and it was one of those stories that seemed to fall out of me. I mean, I'd been plotting it and thinking about it and, in truth, living so much of it for a long while, so the actual drafting was natural and, thankfully, I didn't have to fight too hard. I can't say that's the case with all of the books I've written!

For the next generation of authors, my main piece of advice is to ENJOY IT! Writing isn't always easy, and often a writer can feel very much like they have no idea what they're doing, that they're not "qualified" to be writing, and that every other writer is so much better. But writing should bring you joy. If it doesn't, if the enjoyment becomes lost somewhere or buried under other emotions, then I suggest taking a break and connecting again with those early feelings you had when you first started writing. Try something new! Write something silly, or try poetry, random scenes that pop into your head, short stories, or a new genre, or a blog post, or a diary . . . Anything that can take you away from the piece that's making you stressed. Remembering why I started writing in the first place has always helped me push through the trickier days.

What inspired you to tell Alex's (and Kevin's) story?

The bond between human and dog is a remarkable one. I love dogs more than any other animal—more than most humans, truth be told!—and I've read about so many amazing dogs that save lives and provide more than companionship to their owners (though I'm certainly not putting down the power of simple companionship!). How can you not be inspired by these canine heroes?

Kevin is actually based on my own dog Claude. Claude is my son's best friend. Their relationship is extraordinary, and from the first days Claude came to live with us, he showed an immediate bond with my youngest son. He senses when my son needs love, needs protection, needs calming. He defends him, nurtures him, and cares for him in a way that proves that dogs have a sixth sense and truly are a human's best friend.

(My other dog, Ian, is another incredibly special dog, though perhaps more goofy and happy-go-lucky than Claude. Maybe one day he'll make an appearance in a book!)

As for Alex, his story is all about finding and understanding friendship, how it presents itself (or doesn't), and what it means to individuals. Neurodivergent people don't always understand other people and social interactions immediately, or ever, and navigating those relationships and experiences can be a minefield. Often how we think friendships should be is not



always what we need or actually want. Sometimes we don't realize friends are right there at our side, battling for us every day, because that relationship doesn't mirror those we see around us. Quiet, patient friendships are just as real as obvious ones. I think some children (and adults!) who don't always fit neatly into a box as is expected throughout life need to feel safe, accepted, and welcome, and if someone makes us feel these things, then perhaps they can and should be considered a friend.

Why do you think it's important for kids to read about protagonists like Alex, who may see and experience the world differently than they do?

As humans, we are being constantly challenged, always adapting in order to overcome setbacks. It's not until we've been through certain trauma do our experiences become personal and our ability to put ourselves in other people's shoes much more possible. And there are so many struggles others have endured that we don't fully understand until we or someone we know is directly affected. *All the Small Wonderful Things* is ultimately a story about friendship, but it's also about understanding, empathy, and compassion. What we see on the outside is rarely what's going on in the inside.

Autism is a relatively new addition to my family, and like most people, up until it was welcomed into my home, my knowledge of the disability consisted of the stereotypical portrayals in the few movies, TV shows, and books available, many written years ago and utterly outdated and badly researched. Yet when I began to learn more about autism, meet more autistic people, and read accounts and experiences lived by actual autistic people, I realized how true the saying is that autism is not one size fits all and goes way beyond brilliant minds trapped inside bodies unable to show emotion.

Some autistic people may share certain struggles on a daily basis, such as their inability to recognize social cues or their sensitivity to noise, but they are as varied as non-autistic people in every sense. Yet despite our research and comprehension, society still doesn't accommodate for autistic people all that well, causing them to often feel alone and confused when they needn't be. Children in particular can be seen as outsiders and odd.

All the Small Wonderful Things not only offers young readers authentic representation of how one autistic child may process moments that most non-autistic people wouldn't give a second thought to; it also shows that making one small accommodation, one comment in passing, one minute to think before we act, can have a lasting and considerable impact on others.

What would you like readers to take away from *All the Small Wonderful Things*?

Hopefully enjoyment first of all! *All the Small Wonderful Things* may indeed give an insight into one autistic person's day-to-day experiences, how they process the world around them, how confusing things can sometimes be, but I would love more than anything for readers to go away satisfied and with a smile on their face. I want them to feel healed, fulfilled, and warmed. I want them to go out into the world and pat all the dogs, think twice before passing judgment, and realize that kindness, even just those tiny choices we often overlook, can make a difference in someone else's life. *All the Small Wonderful Things* is intended to be like a gentle hug, an upbeat story, soft and quiet, and something I think many of us need in these stressful and often dark times.

What's your favorite book starring a dog?

Gah! I don't know. Can I only pick one? I'm disobeying! I love *Wish* by Barbara O'Connor, *The Dog Who Lost His Bark* by Eoin Colfer, and *Alone* by Megan E. Freeman. Oh, and *The Dog Runner* by Bren MacDibble.

There are more, but I'm going to stop!

What's up next for you?

Well, a few things . . . I've been working hard on my next books, which you'll be pleased to know all star remarkable dogs doing remarkable things! I have a couple of new middle-grade manuscripts I'm writing that dive further into how having a uniquely wired autistic brain can sometimes be hard but sometimes be hilarious. As well, I like to write about mental health issues and how they present themselves, how society makes those who suffer feel damaged and worthless, so readers out there who also suffer can feel seen and cared for. I've also been writing a series of short chapter books, something a little different for me, and that has been so much fun. Hopefully one day they will all sit on bookshelves around the world!

I'm passionate about supporting my fellow authors, and particularly in the representation of disabled and neurodivergent kids in children's literature, so I'm learning more from the community of disabled authors and illustrators and hoping I can uplift and support and champion as many as possible.

These discussion questions were created by Bethany Nevile.

