



By Leah Pileggi
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Meets the Common Core State Standards for College and Career Readiness—Reading Literature. Grades 6-12. Standards 1-10.

Discussion Guide

Bricks on the floor, three stone walls, and that too-tight wove metal door. A cage. I stood up and walked the length of my cage. Six not-angry steps long and then 'bout four wide.

What if you were ten years old and thrown into prison with hardened criminals? That's just what happens to Jake Oliver Evans. Inspired by a true account of a prisoner in the Idaho Territorial Penitentiary in 1885, Jake's story is as affecting as it is shocking.

Convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to five years, Jake is taken under the wing of a young guard and the kindly warden, as well as a few fellow prisoners. He is taught to read and given a job tending hogs at a nearby farm. In prison, Jake finds a home he has never had in a place most people are desperate to leave. But when he has to make a choice about right and wrong during an explosive escape attempt, Jake jeopardizes his friendships and his security.

Debut novelist Leah Pileggi introduces a strong yet vulnerable character in an exciting and harrowing story of a child growing up on his own in America's Old West.

Discussion Questions

1. There were some Chinese inmates in the Old Pen in 1885. What had brought many people from China to America at that time in history?
2. Inmates who worked to build the walls of the Old Pen were given dynamite. In this story, that ultimately turned out to be a disaster. And yet in real life, inmates really did build the stone walls. Why were they allowed to handle dynamite then but today that would be impossible?
3. Dentistry in the 1880s. And you think it's bad now! Find out what you can about dental care at that time.
4. Why didn't Mr. Criswell try harder to have his family adopt James?
5. What would you have done differently than James to survive in the Old Pen?
6. Give examples of the progress James made in learning to read.
7. James decides that the bad things in his life will go to the up-high bunk in his cell. What does he put up there, and why would he spend his time imagining something like that? How do the contents change during his time there?
8. Mr. Norton's fate. Was it James' fault?
9. James's relationship with his father is complex. Do you believe that, in the end, James understands why his father did what he did?
10. Should James have been convicted of manslaughter in the first place? Why?
11. Pick out some examples of "place" that made you feel as though you were there with Jake.