

DISCUSSION GUIDE



THE ONLY THING BIGGER THAN THE WORLD IS FEAR

Lucy's life by the pond has always been full. She has water and friends, laughter and the love of her adoptive mother, Lynn, who has made sure that Lucy's childhood was very different from her own. Yet it seems Lucy's future is settled already—a house, a man, children, and a water source—and anything beyond their life by the pond is beyond reach.

When disease burns through their community, the once life-saving water of the pond might be the source of what's killing them now. Rumors of desalinization plants in California have lingered in Lynn's mind, and the prospect of a “normal” life for Lucy sets the two of them on an epic journey west to face new dangers: hunger, mountains, deserts, betrayal, and the perils of a world so vast that Lucy fears she could be lost forever, only to disappear in a handful of dust.

CHAPTER BY CHAPTER QUESTIONS

CHAPTER ONE

- What is the conflict that is set up in the first chapter? Explain it in detail and then hypothesize the role it may play in future chapters.
- How would you describe Lucy and Stebbs' relationship? Cite specific examples from the text to support your view.

CHAPTER TWO

- When speaking of those who are sick, Lynn says, “Maybe those that get sick are just happy to have it done, no matter how it ends. Like when Poe said,
“The sickness-the nausea-
The pitiless pain-
Have ceased, with the fever
That maddened my brain-
With the fever called ‘Living’
That burned in my brain.”

Explain what she means by this. How does it relate to the polio that is affecting everyone?

- After speaking with Lynn, Lucy promises she'll stay away from Carter. What indications show that she will? What indications show that she won't?

CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER QUESTIONS CONTINUED

CHAPTER THREE

- When talking with Vera, Lucy says, “People break rules, Grandma.” Where have we seen examples of rules already broken in this book?
- In an environment such as the one in the book, do you agree with Abigail’s mistrust and decision to live on top of the hill away from everyone? Or do you think it’s better to live with others to provide help and support? Explain your view.

CHAPTER FOUR

- Stebbs says, “Lots of people are mourning right now, and once that’s done, they’ll turn to wanting to know why their people died. They’ll need someone to blame.” Do you believe this way of thinking is true? When have we seen similar reactions in history? In literature?
- Why do you think Monica chose not to go with her son? Do you understand her choice? Why or why not?
- When faced with the dilemma of having to leave the pond behind to protect Lucy, Lynn says she would do it because, “that’s what a real mother does.” Where in the book so far have we seen examples of Lynn treating Lucy like a mother would her child. Cite specific examples from the text.
- When saying goodbye to people, Lynn states, “Beyond Stebbs and Vera, who else have I got to say it to?” Lucy replies, “There’s others that like you, if you’d let ‘em.” Why do you think Lynn doesn’t let them? What is her motivation?
- When Lucy questions whether she is the carrier of polio, Lynn says, “I know you right past your skin, through your bones and down into your blood, and there is nothing inside of you that could hurt anyone. I know if for a fact, I know it the way the sun’s going to come up tomorrow the same place it did today.” Do you believe her? Who do you think is the carrier of polio? Why? What indications show that this person would be?

CHAPTER FIVE

- Where do we see examples of irony in this chapter? List some of them.
- Vera tells Lucy not to live like her, Stebbs or Lynn, “Get out of here. Don’t live Lynn’s way, or Stebbs’ way, or even my way. Live, and go find something new.” Describe what the way of living is for Stebbs, Lynn, and Vera. What do you think the new way of living that Vera wants Lucy to do is?

CHAPTER SIX

- Do you think it’s a good idea for Lynn and Lucy to stop in Entargo? Why or why not?
- Do you think it’s a good idea for Lynn to leave Lucy alone while she searches for shoes? Why or why not?

CHAPTER SEVEN

- How do you feel about Lucy’s decision to allow Carter to follow them? What are the negatives for her doing this? What are potential positives?

CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER QUESTIONS CONTINUED

➤ Do you think that if Carter tests negative for being the carrier for polio, will Lynn allow him to travel west with her and Lucy? Why or why not?

CHAPTER EIGHT

➤ At one point, Lucy thinks that Lynn might be considering staying at the lake instead of going to California. She reflects that, “Oddly, she didn’t feel the elation she expected. The promise of California had seeped its way into her soul without her being aware of it, and the chance to live a different version on the same life—only with a bigger water source—didn’t hold the allure she had expected.” Explain why you think she feels this way.

➤ What do you think is the better option; going to California or settling somewhere that has a good water source? Explain your view.

➤ Lucy tells Lynn, “I wish I could be more like you.” How are Lucy and Lynn alike? How are they different? Use specific examples from the book to support your reasoning.

➤ Lucy reflects on her past life where she was drawn to advice. She thinks that, “Now Maddy was dead, Carter missing, and the intense way Lynn checked and rechecked her rifle reminded Lucy that safety was not a given.” Using what we know and have already seen in the book, hypothesize the potential threats that Lynn and Lucy may face.

CHAPTER NINE

➤ Do you think it was a good or bad idea for Lynn to allow Joss to travel with them? Evaluate both the positive points and negative points.

➤ Joss tells Lucy that there was a time where, “Sometimes it almost made me stark crazy, the pressure of having all those choices. I could’ve been a lawyer, doctor, bus driver, violinist—hell, even an astronaut.” Describe what she meant by that pressure. Do you believe that is true? Do you feel pressure like that? Explain why or why not.

➤ What kind of pressure do you think is worse... the pressure Joss used to feel or the one that they are living with now? Why?

➤ At the end of the chapter, Lynn compares Entargo to the lump of cancer Vera cut out of Mr. Adams, “An unnatural growth cropping up somewhere it had no business, in the middle of fields and forest, with straight cement roots no amount of cutting will ever get out of the dirt.” Explain what she means by this metaphor.

➤ Lynn quotes the following lines of a poem:

“And in these dark cells,
packed street after street,
souls live, hideous yet-
O disfigured, defaced,
with no trace of beauty
men once held of light.”

Explain what she means by these lines using specific examples from the text.

CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER QUESTIONS CONTINUED

CHAPTER TEN

- Joss comments on Lynn's skepticism of people, "Do you always think people are a bad thing?" Lynn responds with, "Generally." Do you think she's right to feel this way? Why or why not? If you were in this situation, who do you think you would be more like; Lynn or Lucy? Explain why.
- After Joss finds out that Lucy is a dowser, she comments on Lynn by saying, "No wonder she keeps you so close." Lucy replies, "Lynn keeps me close 'cause she loves me." Joss says, "You keep telling yourself that, honey." Do you think there is any truth in Joss' words? What indications show that there might be? What show that her words aren't true? Use specific examples from the book to support your responses.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

- Evaluate Joss using what you've seen in the chapters since she's become a part of Lynn and Lucy's group. What are her good qualities? What are her bad qualities?
- In your opinion, do you think Joss is good or bad? Why?

CHAPTER TWELVE

- Are you surprised about Joss leaving Lynn and Lucy? Why or why not?
- We see a lot of new conflicts come up in this chapter. Describe some of these conflicts and then hypothesize what you think will happen with each.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

- Examine the character of Joss. Why do you think she chose to leave Lynn and Lucy and join this group instead?
- Do you think it was a wise decision for Lynn to leave the man and Joss behind? Why or why not?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

- Lucy is driven by the idea of hope that she'll be with Carter again. What else is driving or motivating Lucy and Lynn?
- When Lynn comments that she wishes she knew what she was doing, Lucy tells her that she does. Lucy states, "I'd have been dead hundreds of miles back without you." Lynn says, "You wouldn't be... You got a light in your eyes now when we talk about California. You want it, and you'd keep going without me in order to get it." Do you believe that is true? Could Lucy survive without Lynn? Why or why not?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

- Lucy reveals that she's terrified of being alone, while Lynn says, "Here you are terrified we haven't seen anybody, and I'm thrilled to death." In what other ways are Lynn and Lucy different? How are they alike? Use specific examples from the text to support your view.

CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER QUESTIONS CONTINUED

- Lynn recites Whitman by saying:

“I exist as I am, that is enough.

If no other in the world be aware I sit content,

And if each and all be aware I sit content.”

Explain what these lines mean and how they relate to Lynn’s way of thinking.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

- Explain how Lynn and Lucy’s view of graveyards differ. Whose view do you agree with? Why?
- Do you agree with Lucy; is Lynn a great mom? Evaluate both her good and bad qualities as a mother.
- Lucy and Lynn talk about “what ifs.” Lynn says, “But that’s life, little one—lots of little maybes and what ifs all lined up in a row. And if you put your mind to following some of them that never came about, you’ll get lost and not find your way back to the way it really is.” What are some “maybes” and “what ifs” that Lucy seems to be carrying around with her?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

- Consider Lynn’s question to Lucy about staying at this house or continuing on to California. Do you think it was fair of her to ask Lucy? Why or why not?
- Lucy and Lynn talk about the choice to become a mother in this chapter. Examine the different forms of mothers that have been seen in the book so far. Who is a mother? What makes them a mother? Are there people who are called mothers but aren’t good mothers?
- Explain what Lynn means when she says, “In a world like this, you pay it forward, ‘cause more than likely you didn’t deserve it when you got it the first time.” Can you think of examples from the text where we see Lynn doing this?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

- How would you characterize Fletcher? Cite specific lines to help support your view.
- Should Lynn and Lucy trust Fletcher? Why or why not?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

- Fletcher can’t remember his age and says, “Certain things slip away from you, when you’re on the road as long as I have been.” Why do you think his age is one of the things that slipped away? What’s significant about that?
- When Lynn asks Fletcher why he is helping them, he replies, “I understand you’ve been on a hard road, and I don’t doubt my wife has seen the same trials. I’ll help you—on stranger to another—in the hopes that somewhere, someone is doing the same for her. If I can’t find her, the best I can do is believe in karma.” Lynn tells him, “And keep the karma talk to yourself.” Do you think Lynn believes in karma? Why or why not?

CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER QUESTIONS CONTINUED

- Where has karma come into play for Lucy and Lynn in the story? You may list both positive and negative examples.
- Fletcher tells Lynn and Lucy that he's never settled down. He comments, "Because I've learned a lesson, and more than once. If you have something, someone will take it from you, and with the loss comes suffering. It's best to be beholden to nothing." Where do we see examples of this way of thinking happen to Lynn and Lucy in the novel? Do you believe this is a good way to live? Why or why not?

CHAPTER TWENTY

- Why do you think Lucy is so afraid of the mountains when she's overcome so much else?
- When Lucy talks with Fletcher about Sand City, he says, "Meaning that I don't want you to have Sand City set up in your head as a utopia—a place where everything is perfect... The folks there are kind, and life is easier, definitely. But there's still illness and accidents, and different kinds of work to be done every day." At this point in the story, do you believe Lynn and Lucy made the right decision to leave their farm? Why or why not?
- Lucy tells Fletcher that she's afraid she's like her mom, "You don't know the half of it, Fletcher. My mom, my real mom, she killed herself rather than have to face her fears. That's who I am. It's in my blood." Do you believe this? Do you think Lynn is this type of person? Where do we see indications in the book that she is? Where do we see indications that she isn't?
- Lucy tells Fletcher that she plans to find Carter again, but Fletcher tells her that when she gets to Sand City she's going to meet a whole new group of people, "You'll be welcome in Sand City. A whole group of new people, kind ones, people who'll take to you—and you to them. It's apparent that you form attachments quickly. Will you walk out on a whole city of new friends for the sake of one old one?" Lynn responds by saying, "Is it right for me to leave Carter alone forever because my grandma didn't know the answer to a question?" Whose way of thinking do you think is right? Would you side with Fletcher or Lucy? Explain why.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

- Lynn tells Lucy not to trust Fletcher because he is still a stranger. What do we know about him? What don't we know about him? Would you trust him? Why or why not?

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

- Explain and provide examples of how Lynn and Lucy's roles have been reversed in this chapter.
- Fletcher tells Lucy that, "I think women traveling alone face a unique set of challenges, and it's best if Lynn is feeling well when I leave you." What are some potential challenges that he speaks of? Using what you've seen so far, hypothesize what he means.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

- Why is Lucy so upset for Fletcher to leave them?

CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER QUESTIONS CONTINUED

- Lynn recited the following lines to Lucy:

“And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.”

What do these lines mean? How do they relate to what is happening in the book?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

- Evaluate the choices Lucy makes in this chapter. It seems at times she puts herself at more risk in order to survive. Where does she seem to put herself in danger? Do you agree with her choices? Why or why not?
- What are the obstacles that Lucy comes up against in this chapter? How does she overcome each?
- Why do you think Lucy reveals her secret about witching water?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

- How has Lynn changed in this chapter? Cite specific examples. What do you think has made her change? Explain.
- Compare and contrast Nora and Bailey. How are they different?
- Compare the environment that Lynn and Lucy are in to what they are used to. How is this place different?
- Based off of what you’ve seen so far (and your answer to the above question), do you think it’s a good thing or a bad thing that they are here? Explain your view.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

- How would you characterize Ben? Describe him and cite specific examples from the book to support your views.
- How would you characterize Lander? Describe him and cite specific examples from the book to support your views.
- Compare and contrast Ben and Lander. How are they alike? How are they different?
- When talking about trusting the people in the town, Lynn says, “Thing is, you’ve got something to offer in return. Me, I don’t matter here.” Do you think that is true? Why or why not? Does Lynn have anything to offer? Explain.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

- How have Lynn and Lucy’s roles been reversed? Cite specific examples from the book.
- How do Lynn and Lucy’s views about Las Vegas differ? Explain each of their views. Who do you think is right? Why?
- How would you describe Lynn and Lander’s relationship? Cite specific examples from the book to support your views.

CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER QUESTIONS CONTINUED

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

- ▶ When Nora talks about mountain lions, she says, “They made me realize some animals are better than others, that the food chain in all of its barbarism is exactly what nature intended.” How is this a metaphor to the book? Explain using specific details to support your response.
- ▶ When Nora talks about the mountain lion that killed her daughter, she says, “I don’t know if you’ve ever seen a cat hunt, but a lion will stalk its prey same as little tame cats. No matter how many times I tell myself it’s helping nobody, I’ve played it through my head a million times how that cat must’ve followed the two of them, sliding through the shadows and waiting for the chance to pounce.” How can this be a metaphor to what has happened in the book so far?
- ▶ How can the above quote foreshadow something that may happen in the future of the novel?

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

- ▶ Ben asks Lucy if she would leave with Lynn if Lynn decides to leave, and Lucy says she will. Do you believe that she would? Why or why not?
- ▶ When Lucy says that she would leave with Lynn, Ben replies, “Because that’s what she wants, or what you want?” Why do you think Lucy would leave with Lynn?
- ▶ React to what Ben reveals about the town and its lack of women. Do you think it’s still safe for Lynn and Lucy to stay there or not?
- ▶ Why might Lucy still want to stay there?

CHAPTER THIRTY

- ▶ Do you think Lynn and Lucy will be able to escape Las Vegas? Evaluate the pros and cons. What do they have going for them? What is against them?
- ▶ Do you view Nora as an ally or an enemy? Explain why.
- ▶ Lucy tells Nora that she’s never killed but, “I guess I could kill if I had to, but Lynn’s made sure I haven’t had to.” Based off of what you know about Lucy, do you believe that she could kill if she had to? Why or why not?

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

- ▶ How does Lucy react to Lynn’s confession about killing Carter? Do you think Lucy is warranted in this response? Why or why not?
- ▶ Examine the character of Nora. In what ways is she acting like a mother toward Lucy?
- ▶ Do you believe that her motivation is sincere or do you think she has ulterior motives? Explain.
- ▶ Discuss in more detail why Ben is so unhappy about Lynn and Lucy staying.
- ▶ Examine Ben and Lucy’s relationship. How do they view each other? Explain using specific details from the book.

CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER QUESTIONS CONTINUED

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

- Lynn tells Lucy about the cars that are sent out into the desert. She says, “They go out, and they come back with nothing to show for it. Two days ago one of the cars came back way early, with passengers. They picked up three men in the desert.” What do you think is going on?
- When Lynn sneaks in to talk with Lucy, Lucy comments about the three men who are brought back and says, “There’s no reason to think any harm was done to them, anymore than’s been done to us.” Lynn replies with, “And what has been done to us?” What does she mean by this? What has been done to her and Lucy?
- While out witching, Lucy expresses to Ben that she feels good. Ben asks her what changed to make her feel this way. What has changed for her? What makes her feel good at this point? Explain in detail citing specific examples from the book.
- Nora tells Lucy that they need to kill in order to survive, “I understand you’ve got your reservations about the process, but you’ll understand in time. And remember, if it weren’t for our ways we’d have been dead in this city long ago, and you on the road with no one to save you.” Do you believe in her thinking? Are there times you need to kill in order to survive?

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

- In what ways does Ben’s dad betray him? Do you think he ever loved Ben? Why or why not?
- Ben begs Lucy to take him with her. He says, “You will take me with you! You can’t leave me broken.” Lynn replies by saying, “Ben... you were broken long before I got here.” What does she mean by that? In what ways was Ben broken?
- Lynn tells Lucy that she is the one who holds onto hope. In what ways have we seen Lucy hold onto hope throughout the book?

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

- Lynn reveals that she doesn’t like water because, “When I was a kid I found a globe and showed it to Mother, thinking I’d found something that would save us yet, that we didn’t have to live the way we did. She told me it was all salt, and no relief in it—‘Water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink.’ I broke the damn thing and swore to never find comfort in anything too good to be true again.” How has this way of thinking shaped Lynn’s life? Where do we see her thinking like this in the book?
- What does Lucy mean when she quotes Emerson:
“I heard or seemed to hear the chiding Sea
Say, Pilgrim, why so late and slow to come?”
- Lucy says that she’s not like Lynn and Lynn agrees. So who is Lucy? How would you describe her at this point? Cite specific examples from the book to support your response.
- Lynn says that Lucy doesn’t need her anymore. Do you believe this is true? Why or why not?

This guide aligns with Common Core Standards ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10 1, 2, 3, 9, 10 and ELA-Literacy.W.9-10 1.