

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.

WHOLE BOOK DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How are women perceived in the novel? Examine the role of a woman in this novel.
- How do different characters view/treat women in this book? Select specific characters and discuss how they are viewed/treated in the novel.
- How does Lynn view men in the novel? Discuss specific characters and her views of them.
- How does Lucy view men in the novel? Discuss specific characters and her views of them.
- In a novel, characters often change for good (or worse). What characters changed for the better and what was the transforming moment? What characters changed for the worst, and what was the transforming moment?
- What do you believe is the main conflict in the novel? Define it, discuss how it shapes the book and how it was resolved (or why it wasn't resolved).
- Why do you think Mindy McGinnis decided to write the book in the POV of Lucy? How would the story have changed if it were written in the POV of Lynn?
- The title of the book is *In A Handful Of Dust*. Analyze and explain the meaning of this title. Why is it important in the story? Cite specific textual evidence to support your analysis.

WHOLE BOOK DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

- The lack of water devastates the land, but from that, what other problems and implications arrive? Explain these in detail. Can you hypothesize other problems that weren't addressed in the book that may arise from the lack of water?
- How is setting important to this novel? Analyze specific settings and explain its significance using specific examples as to how they contribute to the overall theme/message of the novel.
- What statement is the author, Mindy McGinnis, making about family? Explain using specific examples from the text.
- Lucy looks at Lynn as a surrogate mother. Do you believe Lynn is a good parent? Evaluate both their good and bad qualities before making a final decision and explaining your view.
- Survival is an ever-present concern for the characters. How does this drive the action of the book? How does it affect different characters in the book?
- Compare Lynn and Lucy. How are they different? How are they alike?
- Examine the character of Lucy. How does she change throughout the course of the novel? Trace her progression from the start to the end and use specific examples to show her transformation.
- Examine the character of Lynn. How does she change throughout the course of the novel? Trace her progression from the start to the end and use specific examples to show her transformation.
- Explain how Lucy overcomes specific obstacles in the novel (both personal and environmental). Cite specific textual evidence to support your analysis.
- Who are the secondary characters in the novel? Explain how each of these secondary characters is important and what they contribute to the novel.
- Identify some major themes or the central idea in the book. Where do we see examples of it? How does this theme develop throughout the book and how does it affect the outcome? Cite specific textual examples to support your responses.
- Additional Question: Can you think of any other stories, poems, movies, or songs that have this same theme? Describe them.
- We read books for enjoyment, but sometimes we discover that books can teach us things. What has *In a Handful of Dust* taught you? Describe in detail.

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

FURTHER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ➤

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LUCY'S DEVELOPMENT A

- Name the “supports” that are taken away from Lucy as she develops and learns to stand alone through her journey.
- Of the “supports” that are taken from her, which one created the most important growth in Lucy once it was taken away?
- Write or discuss with the group how this moment was pivotal to Lucy's development and how this moment represents the most important part of her learning to stand on her own.
- In what ways does Lucy want to be like the following women: Lynn, Neva (her biological mother), Nora? In what ways does she not want to be like each of them? (A graphic organizer may be helpful!)
- Which of the things she wants do you see her achieving either in the book or in the future? How will she avoid the traits or behaviors she doesn't want?
- At the end of the book, who is Lucy? How would you describe her?

HOW TO BE (OR NOT BE) A PARENT

- Early in the book, different characters mistake Lynn for Lucy's mother. There are times when she doesn't correct them. What are some reasons for this?
- In what ways does Lynn fulfill Lucy's need for a mother figure?
- Why does Lucy temporarily suspend that relationship with Lynn? Why and when does she reaffirm her commitment to Lynn?
- Lucy lets Nora fill her need for a mother figure/mentor for a short time. However, when Lucy discovers Las Vegas's water source, she severs that relationship. Why does she do that? She's been traveling with Lynn whom she knows has killed in the past. What is the difference between Nora and Lynn? Why does Lucy choose Lynn over Nora?
- Lucy is not Lynn's daughter by blood. Describe their relationship as mother and daughter. Is it successful? Why? Ben is Lander's son by blood. Describe their relationship. Is it successful? Why or why not? What do we learn about what truly makes someone a parent?

LUCY AND LYNN

- Page 260 says, “But Lucy's newfound will to live and Lynn's refusal to die kept them both moving.” Both Lucy and Lynn are determined to survive, but they carry this determination differently. What is the difference between Lucy and Lynn at this point and points beyond this. Use examples from the text to support your answers.
- Lynn and Lucy are survivors. What makes them survivors? Compare them to the characters who do not survive this story (Ben, Lander, Joss). What makes Lynn and Lucy able to survive? Why did the others not survive?

FURTHER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

➤ In the Nebraska graveyard, Lynn says that Lucy's responsibility will be to build the new society that will come. She says that her responsibility is to protect Lucy. At the end of the book, how have the women already begun to work towards those goals? How do you think those goals will be met in the future?

FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

➤ Water shortage is a real and current issue. Research how other countries and societies are dealing with the issue. What are people doing now to protect and preserve our water supply? What can YOU do today that would make a difference?

➤ Poetry is one of the ways that Lynn and Lucy find words to better express the things they feel, experience, and see. However, it's clear that Lynn relies on poetry as a means of expression more than Lucy. Why do you think this is?

➤ Think about who you are and where you are now. Find a poem that you connect with on a personal level. Commit all of it or part of it to memory and share it with someone.

RELATED MATERIALS

➤ <http://tinyurl.com/lwwnswz> : See the inner workings of the Sand City, CA desalination plant on YouTube

➤ <http://tinyurl.com/ny2ofyo> : Desalination Plant Helps Save A California Coastal Community

➤ <http://tinyurl.com/pndfax4> : The Desalination plant of Perth, Australia runs entirely off of energy provided by a nearby wind farm.



MINDY MCGINNIS

Mindy McGinnis is an assistant YA librarian who lives in Ohio. She graduated from Otterbein University with a BA in English Literature and Religion. Mindy grew up in the woods, and had a deep desire to see if she could survive out there on her own if the situation ever presented itself. That never happened, and the introduction of the internet has quelled that urge. She loves being a writer, because it's the only occupation where you can legitimately stare into space and claim to be working.