

DISCUSSION GUIDE

A L I S O N M C G H E E



all

rivers

flow

to

the

sea

SYNOPSIS

Rose and her older sister, Ivy, have been in a terrible car accident, and Ivy is lying in a coma at a convalescent home. As Rose tries to pick up the pieces of her life and return to high school, she is consumed by her awareness of Ivy's condition and how much her own life has changed. In her grief and anger, she tries to find escape from her feelings in self-destructive behavior, but eventually finds help and solace in unexpected ways, from unexpected people in her life. Rose's inner journey from pain and fear to acceptance and forgiveness is a touching and beautiful story that will not soon be forgotten.

DISCUSSION POINTS

Setting:

1. Describe the town of Sterns. Where is it located? What do you know of the geographic setting of the town?
2. What time of year is it? How do the seasons affect the story as it develops?
3. How does the setting reflect Rose's story? How would the story be different if it were set in a city, or in a suburban area?
4. Why does Rose choose to go to the Sterns Gorge when she meets Jimmy there? Why does

she return to that place with the other boys?

5. Compare the Hinckley Reservoir and the town drowned beneath it with the ancient town of Pompeii, which Rose reads about to Ivy. Why are they both so significant to Rose?
6. What is the significance of the night in the haymow when Rose, Ivy, Joe, and Tom were young, the night of the Truth or Dare game? Why does Rose return to the haymow the night that Tom finds her there?

Characters:

1. Compare the personalities of Rose and Ivy. How are they similar and how are they different? What does Rose mean when she says, "Ivy didn't bother with process"?
2. Describe William T.'s character. What is his motivation for taking care of Rose and Ivy? In what specific ways does he help Rose work through her grief?
3. Describe Rose and Ivy's mother. Why doesn't she visit Ivy? Why won't she understand that Ivy can't get better? What does William T. mean when he says to Rose, "Your mother's not normal"?

4. In what ways are Rose and Ivy like their mother? In what ways are they each different from her?
5. What does William T. mean when he says, "We all walk around with a stone in our shoe"?
6. Why does Rose change from reading the book on Pompeii to reading the Driver's Manual to Ivy? What is the significance of this change?
7. William T. says, "All Millers go through crazy." What do you know of the Millers, and why would he say that? Compare Joe and Tom Miller. How are they different, and how are they similar?
8. How is Tom Miller different from Jimmy, Warren, and Todd? Describe the differences between Rose's interactions with Tom and with the others.

Theme:

1. What is the significance of the title of the book? Why do you think the author chose that title for this particular story?
2. Rose says, "Ivy was the Sterns Gorge, rushing and tumbling, dark shallow water in a hurry, and I am the Hinckley Reservoir, contained and still." Discuss all the ways this

metaphor relates to their lives as Rose describes them. What other instances of water imagery can you find that help you understand the story?

3. Discuss the various images of stone in the story. What meanings do each of these images present? How do they help us understand the characters?
4. Rose tells us that she is fascinated by the idea of sacrifice, by stories of martyrs, but that Ivy didn't believe in sacrifice. Discuss the theme of sacrifice as it relates to different characters in the story. What does sacrifice mean to you?
5. How many references to scientific principles can you find in the story? What significance do these various ideas have for Rose?
6. Look up the stages of grief on the Internet. How many different stages of grief can you identify that Rose is going through? Which of the stages of grief can you identify in other characters in the story?
7. Look for references to motion and movement in the story. What are some of the ways that the idea of motion tells us something about a person or a feeling?

AN INTERVIEW WITH ALISON MCGHEE

Q. *Your setting for this novel is a very specific town in a very definite locale. The same setting and, indeed, some of the same people appear in your other novels both for teens and adults. What draws you to this setting, and how does it feel for you as an author to have characters appear in more than one book?*

A. I grew up in the foothills of the Adirondacks, in the exact location of my novels. I've fictionalized the name, and I make things up as I see fit, such as the diners and a trailer park. The landscape of the novels is the landscape of my roots, of my heart and soul. The setting has become almost a character in and of itself.

I didn't intend to set all my novels in the Adirondacks, but that's what has happened thus far. I'm a person of mountains and ocean, and I live in Minneapolis, so perhaps it's my way of remaining true to what I think of as my real home, my spiritual home.

As for the characters that reappear in one or more novels, that too was not intentional. It just seemed to happen; William T. appeared one day in Ivy's hospital room, and I saw that he had come a long way from where I had left him in a

previous novel. I love that my characters appear and reappear. It's as if they are living their own lives, apart from and yet connected to mine, and I can check in on them and see what they're doing. They are my shadow lives.

Q. *You have written, in a section of your website: "I have lived my life casting my glance to the periphery, absorbing the wisdom and beauty in the sidelong, the peripheral, the unknown and unnoticed." Would you comment on this in relation to your characters in *All Rivers Flow to the Sea*?*

A. In all my novels, I write about ordinary people living their lives. They are precious to me. The people we are born to and the friends we grow to love become extraordinary by the love we bear them. That is how I feel about my characters.

And it is true that rather than through a direct gaze, or a direct question, we sometimes come to know someone most closely by using our intuition, our senses. Watch the way a mother instinctively reaches to grasp her child's hand when crossing the street. That gesture tells us more about her feelings for her child than any amount of overt description could. And my dog: he understands very few words, but

the nuances of my voice? He understands thousands.

Q. *Many of your novels deal with the theme of loss and how people deal with the unbearable loss of a beloved family member or friend. Is this a theme you are consciously exploring from many points of view?*

A. The theme of loss and redemption is not a theme that I have consciously explored—in fact sometimes I try to get away from it! But it finds me over and over again. And it does seem to me that we live most fully when we are always aware of the fragility, the transience, of life.

Q. *You have written for widely different ages—picture books for young children, middle-grade novels, young adult fiction, and adult books. Does your writing process differ for each of these various ages?*

A. My writing process is the same for all the novels I write. I wait until I have a visual image and the "feel" or texture of the sort of book I want to write. *All Rivers Flow to the Sea*, for example, is a book about water: moving water, still water, water that spills over its banks and changes shape, is transformed. That sense of water, in combination with a sense of the fierce devotion of two sisters, was all I needed to begin the novel.

For picture books, I need to get into a certain mindset. I mostly write picture books for fun, and for a complete change from writing novels. I wait until a refrain, or a certain charming turn of phrase, comes to me, and then I can begin to build a picture book around it.

BOOKS BY ALISON MCGHEE

MIDDLE GRADE:

SNAP

(Candlewick Press, 2004)

Edwina and her friend Sally struggle with the impending death of Sally's beloved grandmother. Even the lists she makes and the rubber bands she wears on her wrists and snaps to remind her of things cannot help Eddie through the labyrinth of feelings that threaten to overwhelm her.

ADULT:

RAINLIGHT

(Papier-Mache Press, 1998)

Starr Williams is killed trying to save a retarded boy from being hit by a car. His death leaves a town bereft, especially the four people whose stories poignantly unfold in this first of McGhee's novels set in the town of Sterns.

SHADOW BABY

(Harmony, 2000)

Clara's friendship with an elderly immigrant metalworker, Georg Kominsky, helps her come to terms with her own family history—a twin sister who died at birth, an estranged grandfather—and to understand that there is possibility and beauty in all of life, even in past tragedy.

WAS IT BEAUTIFUL?

(Shaye Areheart Books, 2003)

At the age of fifty, William T. Jones is

struggling with his deep grief over the death of his son, William J. His erratic behavior jeopardizes his marriage, his job, and his health until he begins to understand the importance of friendship and being able to reach out to others beyond his own suffering.

OTHER BOOKS TO COMPARE AND CONTRAST

FICTION:

A SUMMER TO DIE

by Lois Lowry
(Houghton Mifflin, 1977)

Meg's older, popular sister, Molly, is terminally ill, and her slow realization of the seriousness of Molly's illness leads her through an emotional roller coaster.

TIME OUT

by David Hill
(Cricket Books, 2001)

Kit, troubled at school and home, has fallen into a coma after a running accident. Connected by a thin strand of memory to his former life, he is aware that he doesn't belong in the alternative world into which his consciousness has slipped, and he struggles with the need to return home.

UP ON CLOUD NINE

by Anne Fine
(Delacorte, 2002)

Ian's close friend Stolly is lying in a hospital, unconscious, hooked up to machines, and Ian tries to piece

together the events that brought him to this point. Through alternating chapters between the present situation and Ian's memories of Stol, the personalities of these two inseparable but very different friends come into close focus.

THE YOUNG MAN AND THE SEA

by Rodman Philbrick
(Blue Sky Press, 2004)

His mother's death and his father's self-absorbed grieving have left Skiff feeling responsible for the family home and fishing business, so he sets out on an ill-conceived journey in his small boat to capture a valuable tuna. Throughout the ensuing adventure, Skiff engages in interior dialogues with his mother, remembering her "rules for living."

NONFICTION:

I WILL REMEMBER YOU,

by Laura Dower
(Scholastic, 2001)

The loss of a close family member or friend can be overwhelming and unbearable for a teenager. This book helps guide teens through the grieving process with explanations of feelings, comforting words, and the stories of teens who have experienced loss.

STRAIGHT TALK ABOUT DEATH FOR TEENS: How to Cope with

Losing Someone You Love

by Earl A. Grollman

(Beacon Press, 1993)

Short, terse chapters help teens understand the grieving process and the feelings that can seem

overwhelming to them. Grollman provides insight and exercises to help them work through the difficult times.

MUSICAL RECORDINGS

BEFORE THEIR TIME, VOLUMES I, II, AND III

A series of recordings by various pop and folk musicians with songs that comfort those who are grieving, produced by Michael Whitman, a musician and hospice volunteer. Proceeds from sales support bereavement organizations.
www.beforetheirtime.org

SANITY AND GRACE

(Delta, 1995)

by Judy Collins

An album of songs created by Collins in response to her own grief over the death of her only son.

WEBSITES

www.dying.about.com

This website, dedicated to the grieving process, has a special section called the Sibling Connection for adolescents grieving the loss of a brother or sister.

www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/coma

Information on the making of a public television special about patients in coma.

www.neurologychannel.com/coma

Understanding the physiology of a coma and various medical terminology.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Alison McGhee's critically acclaimed adult novels all take place in Sterns, New York, a fictional town set in the Adirondack region, where she spent her formative years. In addition to *All Rivers Flow to the Sea*, she has written picture books for young children as well as *Snap*, a gracefully told story about a sensitive girl who comes to terms with loss—and learns something about lasting ties.

Of her inspiration for *Snap*, Alison McGhee says, “Recently I went through a rubber band phase, in which I wore several on my wrist at all times and snapped them in an effort to retrain myself out of a couple of bad habits. Sadly, the bad habits remained, but happily, *Snap* was born.”

Alison McGhee is a professor of creative writing and coordinator of the creative writing program at Metropolitan State University, in St. Paul, Minnesota. She also teaches in the MFA in Writing for Children program at Vermont College. The author lives in Minneapolis with her three children.

Discussion Guide written by Connie C. Rockman, literature consultant, adjunct professor of children's and young adult literature, and editor of the *Eighth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators* and the *Ninth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators* (H. W. Wilson, 2000, 2004).