

## Reading Group Guide

### *Away*

By Megan E. Freeman

#### **About the Book**

When a mysterious threat causes much of Colorado to be evacuated, families from all over the state are sent to live in temporary shelters. Teddy, Grandin, Harmony, and Ashanti come from different walks of life, but Camp Rogers brings them together and they become fast friends. Life at Camp Rogers takes some getting used to, but its residents soon settle into a rhythm. Teddy films interviews with other evacuees, while Harmony starts a newspaper to report on happenings at the camp with the help of her new friends. Ashanti helps her mom set up a medical clinic for the camp and Grandin cares for a stray dog even as he mourns his missing dad. However, as more and more time passes, the friends begin to wonder if everyone is maybe becoming a little too comfortable with the new normal. What exactly *is* the mysterious threat behind the evacuation? Will they ever get to go back home? And are the leaders really telling them the truth about what's going on? Working together, and with the help of some trusted adults and a stray puppy named Popcorn, the kids start an investigation that will change their lives forever.

#### **Discussion Questions**

1. Who are the four main narrators, and what format does each use to tell their story? Why do you think the author chose to use multiple voices to tell the story? Why do you think the author chose to mix official communications like radio broadcasts, news conferences, and dictionary definitions with the protagonists' voices in the book?
2. Discuss why you believe each of the kids in the book tells their story in a different format (poetry, letters, scripts, etc.). How is this different from the experience of reading a novel written in prose?
3. What are the narrators, Harmony, Teddy, Ashanti, and Grandin, like? How do they compare to one another?
4. Why do you think Harmony, Teddy, Ashanti, and Grandin become friends? Do you think they would be friends in the outside world? Why or why not?
5. How do the characters feel about having to leave their homes suddenly? Have you ever had to evacuate for an emergency, or have you ever been quarantined? What was it like, and how did it make you feel?

6. When Harmony's family leaves home, they grab their "go bag" full of essential clothing and other items, which is already packed and ready for an emergency. Why do some people pack go bags? What would you put in your own go bag, and why?
7. How do each of the kids cope with the evacuation and with life in Camp Rogers? What do you think would be the hardest part of living in the camp?
8. Harmony writes to her Aunt Beckie, "When we get back to school, I will have a responsibility to report what I saw." (p. 71) What does she mean? Why do you think she feels responsible for reporting on what she sees?
9. Harmony takes the lead on creating a newspaper the kids call *The Camp Rogers Gazette*. The tagline is "As Powerful As the People Who Read It." Why do you think she chooses this tagline? What power do newspapers have? What about their readers?
10. Why do you think Teddy is obsessed with movies, and why does he immediately begin filming everything when he and his grandmother are evacuated?
11. Which adult or adults is each narrator in the story evacuated with? How do the adults around them support them through this challenging time? Are there any ways the adults in their lives fail to give the narrators the support they need? How do the adults in your life support you when things are hard?
12. Early in the evacuation, Teddy says, "Other people are upset, but I see no reason to panic. We're clearly safe in camp, and whatever's going on out there will become obvious soon enough." (p. 121) Do you think Teddy's attitude is a good one to have in a situation like this? How do you think you would react in a situation like his?
13. Ashanti frequently compares herself and her friends to mythological figures. Teddy does something similar with movies. Why do you think they do this? Did you recognize any of the mythological figures or movies the kids mentioned? If you were going to compare a part of your life to a movie or myth, what would it be, and why?
14. Teddy says, "People invent information in the absence of facts." (p. 121) What does he mean by this? Why do you think this happens? Have you ever seen this happen? How could this be dangerous?
15. What environmental changes are happening in the world of this book? Discuss any similarities you notice about what might be happening around the globe.
16. Ramón tells Grandin, "When we have a choice / between / worry and hope / (and we

do, he says / we always do) / choose hope.” (p. 191) What do you think of this advice? How do you keep hope alive when things start to feel hopeless?

17. In what ways do each of the narrators hope to change the world? Do you have any dreams about changing the world? Discuss.

18. After everyone starts to settle in at Camp Rogers, Harmony wonders, “Does it feel like everyone’s getting a little too comfortable with the status quo?” (p. 208) Why does it worry Harmony that people are getting comfortable with the way things are?

19. At one point, protesters in Camp Rogers are arrested. What are they protesting? Have you ever been to a protest? What was it like to participate? In general, why do people stage protests? Do you think they are an effective method of communication?

20. What does Teddy discover about the videos of the outside world that leadership shows to Camp Rogers residents? Why is this important? What does it mean to the protagonists?

21. Teddy says that “adults routinely underestimate children.” (p. 301) In what ways do the adults in the book underestimate the kids? Has an adult ever underestimated you and your friends? What happened?

22. The kids finally realize that, as Grandin says, “Water [is] more valuable than oil or gas. This whole charade is over water.” (p. 308) What is a *charade*, and in what way is Camp Rogers like one? Do you agree with Grandin that water is more valuable than oil or gas? Why or why not?

23. The kids in the book struggle to know who they can trust as they try to understand exactly what is going on at Camp Rogers and in the broader world. What advice would you give them about choosing people to trust? How do you decide who you can trust in your own life?

24. Were you surprised by the end of the story? Do you think something like this could happen in real life? If so, how do you think we can prevent it? If not, why not?

25. At the end of the book, Teddy says, “Anyone who says art can’t change the world never studied history.” (p. 457) What does he mean by this? In what ways does art change the world in this book? Can you think of a way that art has changed the real world?

### **Additional Questions for Readers of *Alone*, a companion novel to *Away***

26. *Alone* follows Ashanti’s friend Maddie, who misses the evacuation and ends up spending years completely alone. How are the two books similar? How are they different?

What's the effect of reading the story from two different perspectives?

27. Why do you think the author told the story in *Alone* through just one perspective, but *Away* through many different voices?

28. Would you rather be alone like Maddie in a crisis, but fully in control of your own survival, or would you rather be with other people, but controlled by figures like the leadership of Camp Rogers?

### **Extension Activities**

1. Create a poster, video, or slideshow about the muckrakers. Using the library and trusted internet sources, find out who they were and what they did. Why was their work important? Nellie Bly, Ida B. Wells, Ida M. Tarbell, Upton Sinclair, and Woodward and Bernstein are specifically mentioned in the book but be sure to include some other muckrakers in your presentation too! If you'd like, you can include photographs you find online or illustrations you create yourself of what these famous journalists looked like.

2. Teddy's parts of *Away* are written primarily as scripts. Write a script about an event or events in your life. Begin with brief character and setting descriptions. Then tell the story through dialogue, or people talking. If you'd like, gather some friends and make a short movie from your script.

3. Ashanti mentions many figures from Greek mythology throughout the story, and she herself shares a name with a Ghanaian goddess. Choose one of the mythological figures Ashanti mentions and create a poster explaining who they are. Include a retelling of their story and a drawing, painting, or collage of the figure. Here are some options, but you can choose any mythological figure Ashanti mentions: the Lotus Eaters, Ashanti, Penelope (from *The Odyssey*), Demeter and Persephone, Cassandra. Be sure to explain how the figure's myth connects to the events in *Away*.

4. Create your own newspaper to tell the stories of your school or neighborhood. What will you call your newspaper? What will its tagline be? (The tagline for Harmony's *Camp Rogers Gazette* is "As Powerful As the People Who Read It.") What newsworthy things are happening in your neighborhood or school? Is there anything you might want to investigate more deeply? Write at least one issue of your paper and print it out to distribute to friends and neighbors. If you'd like, work with friends to each write an article or two.

5. Instead of being split into chapters, this book is written as a series of short vignettes [sounds like: vin-YETZ] in different forms, including poetry, scripts, press releases, letters, and dictionary definitions. Choose one vignette from the book and write a report

analyzing its form. Why is it written in this style (poem, script, etc.)? How are the lines broken apart? How does the form help convey the message of this part of the book? How does this vignette relate to the rest of the story?

6. Try your hand at writing your own story in vignette form. Perhaps you could tell the story of Grandin's father and others who stayed behind during the evacuation, or write a sequel to this story about what happens to Grandin, Harmony, Teddy, and Ashanti next. Or maybe you'd like to come up with a brand-new story out of your imagination. What voices will you include? Will they speak in letters, poems, scripts, or something else?

7. Throughout the novel, the friends reference *The Wizard of Oz*. Watch the *Wizard of Oz* movie or read the book. In what ways are the kids' experiences during the evacuation like Dorothy's in *The Wizard of Oz*? Write a report or create a slideshow that explores the similarities. Be sure to include an analysis of what these references help you, and the kids in the story, understand about their experience.

*Note: Page numbers are based on the hardcover edition of this title.*

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