



LAUREL SNYDER

ORPHAN ISLAND

“A wondrous book, wise and wild and deeply true.”

—KELLY BARNHILL, Newbery Medal–winning author
of *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*

TEACHING GUIDE

Includes Discussion Questions, Classroom Activities,
and an Exclusive Author Interview

About the Book

On the island, everything is perfect. The sun rises in a sky filled with dancing shapes; the wind, water, and trees shelter and protect the nine children who live there; when they go to sleep in their cabins, it is with full stomachs and joyful hearts. Only one thing ever changes: on that day, each year, when a boat appears from the mist upon the ocean carrying one young child to join them--and taking the eldest one away, never to return.

Today's Changing is no different. The boat arrives for Jinny's best friend, Deen, replacing him with a new little girl named Ess and leaving Jinny as the new Elder. Jinny knows her responsibility now—to teach Ess everything she needs to know about the island, to keep things as they've always been. But will she be ready for the inevitable day when the boat will come back—and take her away from the only home she's known, forever? Acclaimed author Laurel Snyder returns with a powerful, original, unforgettable story of growing up—the things we fight to hold on to, and the things we struggle to let go.



*Nine on an island, orphans all
Any more, the sky might fall*

About the Author

Laurel Snyder is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and the author of many books for children, including *Bigger than a Breadbox*, an ABC Best Books for Children Selection; *Penny Dreadful*, an E. B. White Read-Aloud Award Honor Book; and *Swan: The Life and Dance of Anna Pavlova*, an ALA-ALSC Notable Children's Book and a Parents' Choice Silver Honor Book. Though she grew up in Baltimore, Laurel now lives in Atlanta, far from the water. Often, she spends her nights dreaming of waves, salt air, and bonfires in the sand. Visit her online at www.laurelsnyder.com to learn more.



Photo by Sonya Naumann

Pre-Reading Activity

Have students journal about the following prompt: Imagine what it would be like to live in a place with only kids, no adults. How would this be fun? How might it be challenging? What sorts of things do kids not have to worry about because adults handle them?

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the meaning of the rhyme: "Nine on an island, orphans all/Any more, the sky might fall." What does this rhyme mean to Deen? What does it mean to Jinny? What do you think might be the origin of this rhyme?
2. Why does Jinny not want Deen to leave? Why does she try to make him stay? Discuss Deen's comments when he says, "The island has rules for a reason" (p. 11) and "I might be ready . . . for something else" (p. 12).
3. From the way Ess talks and from her behavior when she first comes to the island, can you guess how old she is? How does her language and behavior change through the course of the year she is Jinny's "Care"?
4. Discuss the three skills that each Elder must teach to the youngest child. Why is each of these skills so important and how do they help the children to live on the island? Why do you think Jinny has trouble teaching Ess the skills?
5. Is it Jinny's job to keep Ess safe or, as Ben says, "to teach her to keep *herself* safe"? (p. 63). What is the difference? What does this difference in perspective tell us about Jinny and about Ben?
6. Discuss the importance of the scene when Jinny swims out in the ocean by herself. How does she change after that experience? What makes Oz say, "What is it with Elders? They always get so weird at the end, don't they?" (p. 132). How does this compare to Jinny's experience of Deen before he left the island?
7. What is the significance of the pile of shoes? How do Ess and Loo react differently when Jinny takes them to bury their shoes? What does she discover when Loo dismantles the shoe pile?
8. How do the other children respond to Jinny's decision to stay? Describe the changes in the island after Jinny stays. How do these changes affect the lives of all the children?



9. How is Jinny affected by the discovery of Abigail's letter? What emotions does the letter stir up in her? What other clues let the reader know Jinny is changing in important ways as her Elder year progresses?
10. Consider the island from the point of view of different characters. For example, what does life on the island mean to Jinny and to Ben? What sets Jak and Oz apart from the others? How does Sam adapt to his first year without an Elder? How would the story be different if it were told from the point of view of any of the children other than Jinny?
11. Discuss the title of the book and how it relates to the children's perception of themselves. How is Jinny affected by Ess's apparent memories of her mama and Abigail's letter to her Mommaloo? Do these thoughts contribute to her decision not to leave when the boat comes for her?
12. Before you read this book, what images did the word "island" bring to your mind? Did you have positive or negative ideas about living on an island? What does the island in this book represent to you? How does the island setting affect each of the characters?
13. Toward the end of the novel, Jinny calls into question the character of the people who live off the island: "Why would anyone send us to a place with snakes and not give us snake medicines, if there *are* such things? What kind of parents do we have that they shipped us off to a place like this?" (p. 257). How has Jinny's attitude about the people who live off the island changed throughout the course of the novel?
14. Compare this story to others that you have read or heard about that involve people living on an island or living in an isolated natural setting, such as *Robinson Crusoe* or *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. How are these stories similar and how are they different? Can you compare this book to any factual stories about people who live in an isolated place?
15. Discuss the quote from George Eliot in the front of this book: "We could never have loved the earth so well if we had had no childhood in it." What did this mean to you before you read the story? What did it mean to you after reading *Orphan Island*?

Extension Activities

CREATING ISLAND LANGUAGE

Working with a small group within your classroom, make a list of all the words the island children use for animals and plants that they encounter on the island. Which of these can you relate to actual plants or animals that are familiar to you? Can you imagine creating a language for your physical world if you did not learn the names from books or adults teaching you about them? Create a vocabulary of your own to describe plants and animals in your own environment.



ISLAND LIBRARY

Make a list of the volumes in the book cabin that you can identify from the descriptions of the stories that the island kids read. Why do you think these books were chosen to be on the island? If you were setting up a book cabin that would be available to kids living on an island, which books would you choose to include and why?

ISLAND MATH

Using clues in the book, can you figure out how long children have been living on the island? How many years does each child spend on the island? Given clues in the story, what ages do you think each of the children are when Ess arrives at the beginning of the book?

SURVIVAL SKILLS

Imagine you are part of the first group of children who arrive on the island. What are the most important tools for you to bring? How would you prepare to live there? What skills would you want to have before you arrive? What skills would you want your companions to have? Would you do anything differently than the kids in the book?

MAPPING THE CHARACTERS

Create visual character maps for each of the children on the island, or work together in groups to create these studies to help you to better understand each of the characters. Use descriptive words from the text to determine each character's thoughts and feelings. Compare your character maps to those of others in your classroom to see how you interpreted each of the characters.

The discussion questions and activities in this guide can be correlated to the following Common Core State Standards:

Key Ideas and Details: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5-7.1, 5-7.2, 5-7.3

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5-7.9

Craft and Structure: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5-7.4, 5-7.5, 5-7.6

Interview with Laurel Snyder

WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO WRITE THIS BOOK WITH AN ISLAND SETTING? DO YOU IMAGINE THE ISLAND TO BE IN ANY PARTICULAR PART OF THE WORLD? WHAT DOES THE ISLAND REPRESENT FOR YOU?

Kids spend so much time living in worlds organized and maintained by adults, and when I was ten, I fantasized pretty constantly about getting away from all that. I climbed trees and built forts and created imaginary realms where I could be in charge, if only for a little while.

So I wanted *Orphan Island* to be about a world entirely run by kids. For me, an island seemed the best way to cut the story off from the adult world. I suppose I could also have sent the kids somewhere by a portal or a wish, but that would have made the book feel more magical than I wanted it to be. I wanted the magic in this book to feel physical and possible, natural. The island itself isn't in a specific place, but it's definitely located off the Atlantic coast. For the most part, I used that as a guideline for what might be able to grow and live there, though I also took a few liberties. When I was a kid, I used to visit my grandmother on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, and we'd take a little boat out to a sandbar near her house. I'm pretty sure the island grew out of that sandbar.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE NOT TO REVEAL WHERE THE BOAT COMES FROM AND WHERE IT GOES? WHY IS IT IMPORTANT THAT WE ONLY EXPERIENCE THE STORY THROUGH THE CHILDREN WHO LIVE ON THE ISLAND?

At its core, this is a book about growing up, about all the confusing things many of us feel at a certain in-between age. Jinny struggles with that, with the idea of leaving behind the familiar island and "setting sail" for an unknown place. I really wanted the

reader to struggle alongside her. If I told you what the world *out there* was like, you'd know whether Jinny should go or not. You'd be wiser than she is. I wanted the reader to experience the mystery and the anxiety and the longing Jinny feels. So I had to leave a lot of questions unanswered. Originally, the book actually had a prologue that provided a sort of origin story for the island, but I took it away when I was revising. It answered too many questions and undermined the story.

HOW DID YOU COME UP WITH THE RULES FOR LIFE ON THE ISLAND? WHY DOES THE STRUCTURE OF THE ISLAND BEGIN TO CHANGE WHEN JINNY DECIDES TO STAY?

All the rules of the island (from the Elder lessons to the bell and the boat) entered the story at different stages. This was a book I revised many, many times, and with each draft, the system of the island became more interwoven and more based on a natural sort of logic. Jinny struggles, as she gets older, with the rules. When I was a kid, I struggled with rules! Wow, did I ever. There were so many of them, and they all felt arbitrary and unnatural to me. Putting my napkin in my lap and not calling out in class and not chewing my fingernails. It was hard for me to sort out what mattered and what didn't. As I got older and it became my job to make my own decisions, I made some mistakes. But at the end of the day, "look both ways before you cross the street" is NOT arbitrary, but "the fork goes on the left side of the plate" totally is. It can be hard to learn what matters and what doesn't matter, and often we learn lessons by making big mistakes. Jinny tests the rules. She exerts her power. And then she has to deal with the ramifications of her choice. Because that's just how life works.