

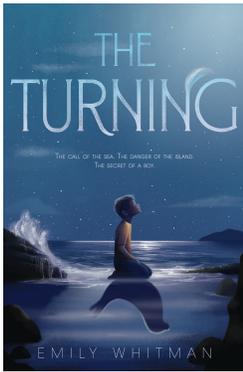
# THE TURNING

BY EMILY WHITMAN

## TEACHING GUIDE

INCLUDES DISCUSSION QUESTIONS, CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES, AND LESSON IDEAS  
ALIGNS WITH COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS FOR GRADES 4-7

### ABOUT *THE TURNING*



Aran is a selkie boy who lives on the open sea with his clan. But he has never quite belonged. He was born without a selkie skin, stuck in human form, never able to transform into a sleek, powerful seal the way his family does. And then Aran discovers that his clan has been keeping a secret from him. A secret that means Aran may never get his pelt. That he is a danger to the entire clan. That maybe he doesn't even belong to the sea at all. So Aran gets his first taste of life on land and all the wonders it holds: trees and birds' nests and cookies and, most surprising of all, friends. Yet the land is dangerous, too. When the unimaginable happens, Aran will be forced to choose. Will he fight for his place on land, or listen to the call of the sea?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What is meant by the title, *The Turning*?  
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.1, 4

At the beginning of the book, what does Aran think it means to belong? What clues does the author give? How has his perspective changed at the end of the book?  
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.1, 2, 3

Selkies belong to two worlds: ocean and land. How are the two worlds different? Can you think of ways you belong to more than one "world"? CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.2, 3

Why is the Moon so important to selkies?  
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.1, 2

Why does Mam carry Aran to the Moon Day rites when she knows it's against the rules? What does it tell you about her hopes and fears for his future?  
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.1, 3

Does Maggie know Aran is a selkie? Why? Why not? Support your opinion with evidence from the novel.  
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.1, 3

Describe the relationship between Nellie and Aran. How does it change from the time he first meets her to the end of the book?  
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.1, 3

How are books and reading important in the novel? How do they play a role in Aran and Nellie’s friendship?

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.1, 2, 3

How does Maggie change over the course of the book? Is there any connection between how Maggie changes and the changes Aran experiences? CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.1, 3, 6

At the end of the book, Aran says, “I’m two everythings.” What do you think he means? Support your opinion with evidence from the novel. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.1, 2, 4;

L.4-7.5A

What do you notice about the way the book is divided? How many sections are there? What is each section titled? How does each section connect to what is happening in the story?

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.3, 5

What are the big events in each section of the novel? What connections can you find between the events and how Aran feels about himself? CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.1, 3, 5, 6

## ACTIVITIES

### LANGUAGE AND WRITING

**Metaphors.** In Chapter 1, Aran says, “My skin was thinner than a translucent kelp leaf.”

Ask students to find metaphors in *The Turning*. (You might choose to divide the class into groups and give each a different section of the book). Combine what everyone finds into a list. Discuss how the metaphors Aran uses are shaped by the world he knows. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.4, 6; L.4-7.5A

**What happens next?** What do you think will happen after the end of the book when Aran goes back to Spindle Island with Nellie? Have students write Chapter 60. Ask them to stay true to what they know about the characters from the book. Share chapters in small groups. Then talk as a class about all the different directions students took their chapters. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.1, 3; W.4-7.3E

**Nellie’s diary.** Choose one or several scenes in the book where Nellie appears, and write Nellie’s diary entries for those days.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.3, 4, 6, 9; W.4-7.3

**Transformation tales.** Read chapters 58 and 59 where Aran gets his pelt. Many cultures have tales of gods or people transforming into animals. If you could turn into a bird or animal, what would you be? Write, imagining you’re changing into that animal. What does it feel like to make that transformation? To be in that body—to swim, slither or fly? How are you stronger, and how are you more vulnerable? Do you experience the world differently? CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.9; W.4-7.3D

**Birdtalk.** What would it be like to know birdtalk? Write a conversation between you and a puffin, a seagull, an osprey, or any other seabird. What would you want to know about them? What would they want to know about you? CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4-7.3B

**Senses and new experiences.** The first time Aran climbs a tall tree is a completely new experience for him (Chapter 35). He feels the rough bark and the swaying branches. He hears the leaves rustling. Write about when you did something for the first time. What did you see, touch, hear, smell, or taste? CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.3, 4; W.4-7.3D

**A strange new world.** As a class, look at how Aran describes Maggie's house when he first enters (Chapters 23 and 24). How does he describe things he doesn't have words for?

Now ask each student to choose a common object (a table, toaster, etc.). Have them write a description as if they're encountering it for the first time. Don't name the object. How does it look? How is it used?  
*CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.3, 4; W.4-7.2D*

## STEM CONNECTIONS

*For a wealth of online resources (lesson plans, activities, and great sites for student research) visit [www.emilywhitman.com/for-teachers](http://www.emilywhitman.com/for-teachers). There you'll find links to educational sites from NOAA's Ocean Today, The Smithsonian, Seal Sitters, and other trusted sources. Topics include Seals and Other Marine Mammals; The Ocean and Life in the Sea; Tides and Currents; and Ocean Health. Be sure to look there for tools for the following activities:*

**Research ocean life.** Work together as a class to make a list of the ocean life mentioned in *The Turning* (marine mammals, birds, fish, shellfish, etc.) Then have students work in pairs to choose and research one of the creatures. Use print and digital sources. Make a multimedia presentation and share findings with the class.  
*CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4-7.1, 3, 9; W.4-7.7, 8; SL.4-7.4, 5*

**Tidal zones.** Tide pools and tidal zones are frequent settings in *The Turning*. Divide into groups and have each research one of the tidal zones. What lives there? How do these plants and animals depend on the movement of the tide? What helps them survive in this rough environment? Have students make posters about their tidal zones. Put them on

the wall and picture the movement of the tides from zone to zone. (Extra writing activity: imagine you're a selkie, and write about an experience you have in the tidal zones. Mention at least three of the things you've put on your poster.)  
*CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4-7.1, 2, 3; SL.4-7.1A, 1B*

**Tides and the moon.** The selkies say that the moon pulls on them like she pulls on the tides. Have the class chart the phases of the moon and its effect on the tides. See tide lesson plans at [www.emilywhitman.com/for-teachers](http://www.emilywhitman.com/for-teachers).  
*CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4-7.1, 3.*

**A healthy ocean.** All life in the sea depends on a healthy ocean to survive. But there are many dangers to the ocean and ocean life, including pollution, ocean warming, acidification, overfishing, plastics, and marine debris. Divide into groups and have each research one of these threats. Have students either create a poster or give a presentation on the issue. Describe the problem and talk about what could be done to help. *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4-7.1, 3; W.4-7.2, 7, 9B; SL.4-7.4*

## TAKE ACTION!

In finding out about challenges to marine mammals and ocean health, have you discovered an issue that you'd like to support? Have students plan a campaign to create awareness and make a difference. Their goal might be on a local scale, like creating teams to clean the school playground. They might want to make a global impact by raising money or awareness about a particular issue, such as keeping plastic out of the ocean. Students might check out other youth activist organizations, such as Jane Goodall's Roots and Shoots ([www.rootsandshoots.org](http://www.rootsandshoots.org)).

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



In Emily Whitman's novels, myth and magic are part of everyday life. Emily has worked in bookstores and behind library reference desks, and written fiction, nonfiction and poetry for educational publishers. She studied history, and now she loves researching her books, whether by mining library treasures or learning to fly falcons. Emily teaches writing workshops in Portland, Oregon. Come visit at [www.emilywhitman.com](http://www.emilywhitman.com).

## BEGINNINGS

Stories are places where worlds meet. That's what Aran says, and that's what I believe. We find each other through stories. Some of the most powerful come from myth and folklore. Even when I was small, their magic took me deep inside myself to a place that felt truer than true.

The first inklings of this book came to me on a trip to Ireland. My family was on a boat to the Skellig Islands. Seals bobbed up to stare at us and dolphins leaped alongside. Then the crags of Little Skellig rose from the waves. A picture flashed into my mind of selkies lounging on those rocks in longlimbs. It was so vivid I can still remember every detail: the pelts piled at their feet, their faces raised to the sun. Soon we landed on Skellig Michael. We climbed stone steps to the top of a pinnacle, and ducked into beehive-shaped huts where monks lived about 1,400 years ago. It felt ancient, elemental, and profound. The next morning I sat down to write, and a few pages about a selkie boy flowed from my pen. I tucked them away.

Later that year, we visited a place we love: Washington's San Juan Islands. We sailed the boat my husband built, landing on lonely beaches and greeting the seals. Orcas breached offshore. Scattered islands, mist and sun, the heartbeat of the waves: this, too, was a perfect place for a selkie boy! I found my earlier scribbles and began to write.

The world is full of magic. When my son was young, he'd run along a beach and seals would follow in the surf. He'd be collecting pebbles, unaware of the seal slipping ashore a body length behind him.

Maybe they were selkies.

We've all got ocean inside us. Beautiful, mysterious, and untamed. Like Aran, we are two everythings.