

The Missing Piece of Charlie O'Reilly by Rebecca K.S. Ansari

Charlie O'Reilly is an only child. Which is why it makes everyone uncomfortable when he talks about his brother.

Liam. His eight-year-old kid brother, who, up until a year ago, slept in the bunk above Charlie, took pride in being as annoying as possible, and was the only person who could make Charlie laugh until it hurt.

Then came the morning when the bunk, and Liam, disappeared forever. No one even remembers him—not Charlie's mother, who has been lost in her own troubles; and not Charlie's father, who is gone frequently on business trips. The only person who believes Charlie is his best friend, Ana—even if she has no memory of Liam, she is as determined as Charlie is to figure out what happened to him.

The search seems hopeless—until Charlie receives a mysterious note, written in Liam's handwriting. The note leads Charlie and Ana to make some profound discoveries about a magic they didn't know existed, and they soon realize that if they're going to save Liam, they may need to risk being forgotten themselves, forever.

Rebecca K.S. Ansari's debut novel is a stunning contemporary fantasy about love, loss, and the power to forgive that we all have inside us—even if we sometimes forget that it's there.



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Pixel Dust Photography/Amber Rishavy



Rebecca K.S. Ansari

is a former ER doctor.

The Missing Piece of Charlie O'Reilly is her first book. She lives in Minnesota with her husband, four sons, and some seriously massive pets.

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Discussion Guide

1. This book opens: “Charlie O’Reilly was an only child. It therefore made everyone uncomfortable when he talked about his little brother.” (page 1) What do we immediately know about this book from these opening sentences? How did it make you feel when you read this? Discuss how this statement draws the reader in.
2. Charlie has very vivid dreams which he learns are trying to tell him something. When Charlie is shocked to discover that Brona is the mother that he has been seeing in these dreams, she replies, “Oh my darling. Whoever told you that dreams aren’t real?” (page 225) Have you ever had vivid dreams? Describe a dream you remember. Do you think that dream was trying to tell you something?
3. How is Charlie affected by the loss of his brother Liam? How is he affected by the fact that no one believes him when he says that Liam existed in the first place? Discuss how Charlie feels when Ana does believe him, even though he has no evidence to back up his claim.
4. Charlie’s mother is a complicated character in this story. Sometimes she is happy and healthy, working on her garden and baking cinnamon buns. At other times, she seems very sad and disconnected. When Charlie goes to the Asylum, what does he discover there that changes his understanding of his mother’s state? How do his feelings about his mother impact the way he interacts with Brona?
5. Jonathon is another complicated character in this story. Discuss his choice to coach Charlie and Ana’s baseball team, then to confess his story to Charlie and Ana, and ultimately to convince them both to go to the Asylum to look for Liam. Do you think he made the right choices? Discuss the ways Brona manipulates Jonathon, and the ways in turn that Jonathon manipulates Charlie.
6. “He felt like he was standing at a massive fork in the road without a compass, a map, or even a clue. Turn left and go to the Asylum on a hope and a prayer that he could get them both out. Or turn right, and stay home waiting for... for what? Another idea? Another plan?” (page 139) How do you think you would have handled the indecision and unclear path that Charlie is on? How is Charlie’s decision-making impacted by the actions of Jonathon, Ana, and Charlie’s mother?

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Discussion Guide *continued*

7. When Charlie is with Brona, he spends a lot of time thinking about her actions, her goals, and her motivation. “His head swam with questions about Brona, the Asylum, and the other kids. Was Brona a savior or a captor? Had the children been rescued or imprisoned? Was life here better or worse than the real world? The answer was always C, all of the above, which didn’t make any sense at all.” (page 276) Discuss these questions as a group. Share your own opinions about Brona and the Asylum. Do you believe that she is good? Is she bad? Does she live in a moral grey area? Support your argument with passages from the book.

8. Many characters in the book have regrets. How does regret play a part in the creation of the Asylum, and in the story of how each child arrives there? How do their regrets change, the longer they are in the Asylum? How do Brona’s regrets impact everyone around her?

9. Many characters in the book struggle with the idea of “forgiveness.” How does understanding the act of forgiveness help to set everyone free? Remember to consider people forgiving each other, as well as themselves.

10. After Jonathon explains the Asylum to Charlie and Ana, Charlie finds himself wondering, “There was just one last question—one that Charlie had pushed away and ignored ever since the Palace Diner. Here, alone, it finally burst out of the shadows of his mind, refusing to be ignored for another second. What if Liam didn’t want to come home?” (page 139) Think about all the children in the Asylum. Some want to come home, some want to stay in the Asylum forever. Put yourself into the shoes of a kid who wants to leave the Asylum and go home. What might make that kid so desperate to leave that it seems worth it to nearly get strangled removing the necklace? What might make a kid want to stay in the Asylum forever?

11. Discuss the title of this book. What do you think Rebecca K.S. Ansari is referring to when she writes about the “missing piece” of Charlie O’Reilly?

12. Before you read this book, what did you think about when you saw the cover? What feelings and emotions do the colors and the imagery invoke? Does this match the feelings you have by the end of the book?



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Activities

Throughout the book, Charlie keeps insisting that his brother Liam is real, though no one else in his life remembers Liam, and there is no evidence to prove that he ever existed. There is a real-life phenomenon called **The Mandela Effect**, which is a “collective misremembering of a fact or event.” Would this be an example of the Mandela Effect? Do some research on other examples of the Mandela Effect from real life. Discuss how this fits into this story.

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There is another scientific concept related to this book called **The Butterfly Effect**. The Butterfly Effect is the idea that a small change in a complex system can have a big impact. According to that concept, a butterfly flapping its wings on one side of the world could cause a typhoon on the other. Of course, a single butterfly flapping its wings cannot literally cause a typhoon. Small events can, however lead to larger and more complex outcomes. Benjamin Franklin wrote a poem about this concept, about how one missing nail in a horseshoe could impact the outcome of a war —————>

For want of a nail the shoe was lost,
For want of a shoe the horse was lost,
For want of a horse the rider was lost,
For want of a rider the battle was lost,
For want of a battle the kingdom was lost,
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

Discuss how The Butterfly Effect relates to this story.

For example, how did Jonathon’s disappearance affect the O’Reilly family?

How did Liam’s disappearance affect the O’Reilly family? How did their reappearances cause an impact?

Going forward, do you think there will be any lasting impact because of their disappearances and reappearances? Will Brona’s actions cause lasting impact?

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Charlie’s dreams tell the story of a family that leaves Ireland due to **the potato famine**. Do some research on the potato famine and the wave of immigration that stemmed from it. Consider if you or someone in your group might have ancestors that were impacted by this famine, or who came to America due to a similar sort of hardship, and what that might have been like.

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There is a lot of magical imagery in the book surrounding the Asylum, including the keys, the shrinking necklaces, and Brona. Create a drawing or find a photograph of the impressions you get from reading about the orphanage, the Asylum, and Brona.

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