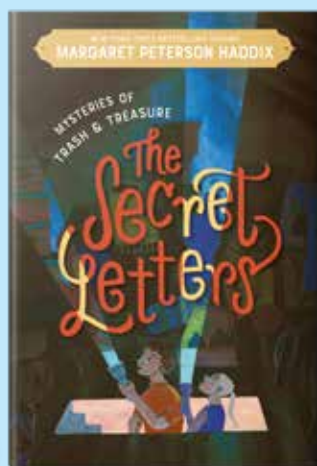
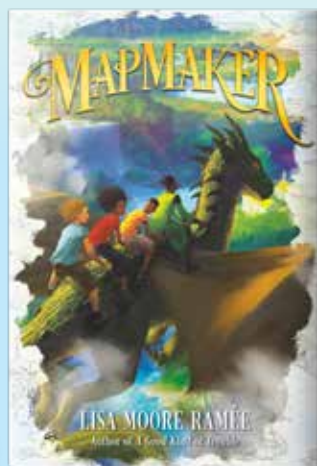
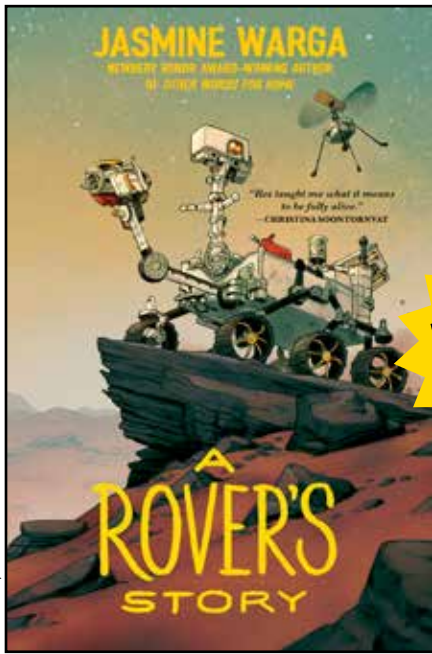


# TOP OF THE STACKS

Great Picks for Middle Grade Readers





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# A ROVER'S STORY

by Jasmine Warga

**BOOK  
TALK**

Resilience is a Mars rover who journeys from creation to launching into space, and then finally returning to Earth. The poignant character of Resilience allows readers to experience the “observations” and the “human feelings” a rover might feel. The emotions of isolation, courage, and friendship are all themes that will move readers to consider what a rover must endure to do the work it has been programmed to do.

*A Rover's Story* brings to light the long, arduous journey by NASA scientists to design and gather information from space unknown. Resilience shows us through landing on space, the perspective of how a rover might see the “heart” of space exploration tasks. The indelible friendships forged between Resilience and the other robots in the novel, Journey, Fly, and Guardian, bring persona to the technical gadgets sent into space and the integral work they are expected to do for human “hazmats.”

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### LEARNING

In *A Rover's Story*, Resilience is the Mars rover launched into space and he is always learning. He says, “I have spent all my time observing. Learning everything that I possibly could. But never creating” (p. 24). How does Resilience learn and make sense of the encountered surroundings? What are the ways in which he uncovers new words and emotions? Do you believe he is truly observing and learning? What does Resilience mean when he says he is “never creating”? Do you agree or disagree with this assessment that Resilience has of himself?

### COMMUNICATION

Throughout the chapters, there are layers of communication significant to Resilience's launch into space. How are the NASA scientists Xander and Rania communicating with one another as they prepare Resilience and Journey? How do they inadvertently and overtly communicate with Resilience and Journey? What are the messages they impart to Resilience that are meaningful while waiting to launch? In addition, Sophie, Rania's daughter is in constant communication with Resilience through her letters. From Sophie's letters, what evidence can we glean about Rania's relationship with her daughter?

### HUMAN EMOTION

Resilience is a Mars rover, and therefore a robot. Human emotions are not included in a rover's programming; however, Resilience takes these qualities in as learning and can tuck them away. In what ways does Resilience show evidence that he understands human emotion? For example, Resilience says, “I know Journey says Mars is no place for human emotions, but I can't help it” (p. 136). Resilience registers specific emotions such as excitement, nervousness, and loneliness.

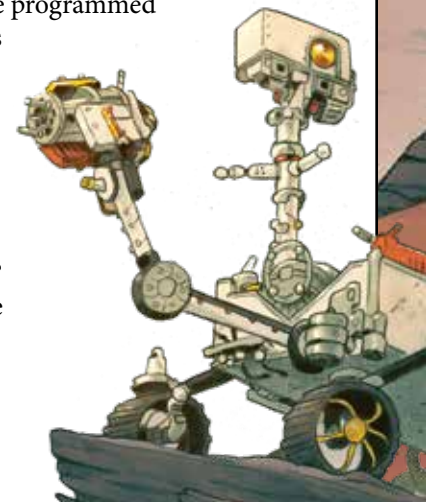
Give examples of Resilience's observations of human emotion and how it is channeled to help accomplish the space mission.

### FRIENDSHIP

Although a rover is a robot without emotions, Resilience shows time and time again throughout the novel that friendship and companionship are integral to the success of a Mars rover. As Resilience is being created, Journey is by his side. How do they lean on one another in the lab? How do they develop camaraderie? As Resilience is launched into space, how does Fly act as a companion to Resilience? How do they lean on one another for hope and strength during periods of isolation and waiting? What are the coping mechanisms they have as friends?

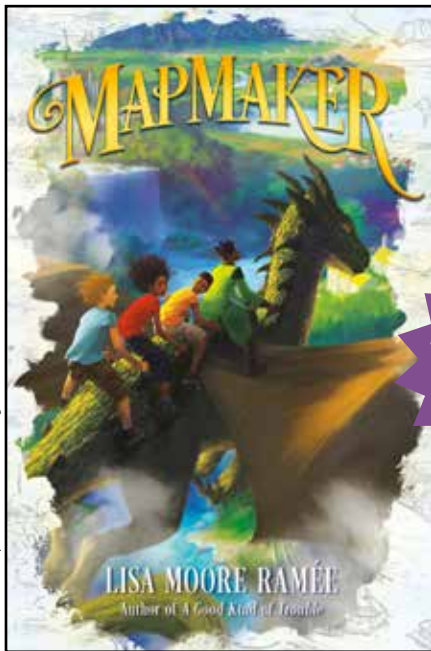
### MEMORY

Throughout the novel, Resilience “remembers” Xander and Rania. In fact, both of their presence in Resilience's journey to space almost appear to be like parental figures. Resilience feels a draw to return to them, and a responsibility to do as they have programmed and expected. What are examples throughout Warga's writing, where Resilience's memory give courage and purpose for the mission at hand? How do memories of the lab and Xander and Rania help Resilience accomplish his mission in space? What mentions does Warga write that bring Resilience “hope” and strength throughout his space mission?



Guide created by Esther H. Ra, Ed.D., CCMC, M.A., lecturer on education, university career advisor, literacy specialist, and certified teacher.





# MAPMAKER

by Lisa Moore Rameé

BOOK  
TALK

Walt and his family have moved to Blackbird Bay and he is not happy about it. He would have rather stayed in Los Angeles, where he had his friends, and everything was familiar. Walt often wishes he could be more like his twin sister, Van, short for Giovanni. Van never has any trouble making friends. Walt prefers to hide out in his room and work on his beloved map world, Djaruba. But shortly after their arrival,

Walt discovers something extraordinary: he has the ability to make maps come to life! Suddenly, his new hometown doesn't seem so boring after all. And when a magical heirloom leaves Walt, his new friend Dylan, and Van stranded in the fantastical world that Walt created, he'll need to harness his new power to get them home.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### HOME

From the beginning of the story, there is an emphasis on “home.” Where is home for Walt? Why is there a longing for home? For his friend Dylan, there is also a longing for a home in a different way. Describe Dylan’s desire for a home that makes Walt and Van realize what they have in their home. Also, during their adventures, what occurs along their journeys for Walt, Van, and Dylan to realize they are far from home? How does the meaning of home change by the end of the novel?

### FRIENDSHIP AND LOYALTY

Walt already had a special friendship with his sister, Van. Their relationship has had its ups and downs as they’ve grown older, but how do they respect, protect, and help each other throughout *Mapmaker*? What about Walt’s friendship with Dylan? How do they meet and what do they have in common? How does Dylan become a part of Walt’s and Van’s inner circle? Who else do they meet along the way that contributes to their adventures? How do they form a team that goes on to “save the world” as Walt says?

### A WORLD WITHIN A WORLD

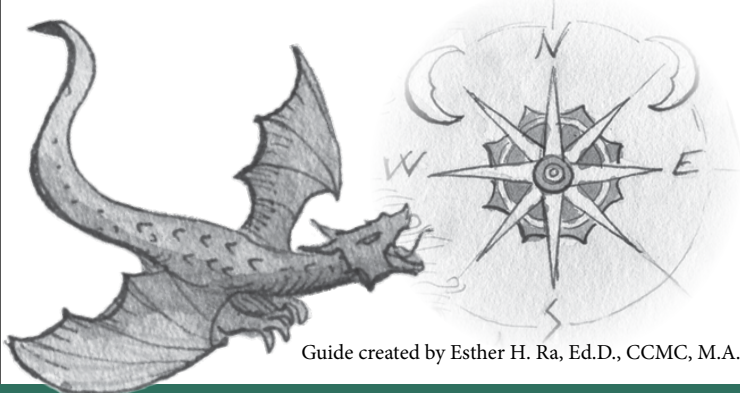
Walt is an ordinary boy who loves making maps. He never dreams he will be able to experience the worlds within his maps, however, he soon discovers their magic. “A powerful mapmaker lives inside, spending his days creating the most incredible maps ever seen” (p. 90). How does mapmaking make Walt feel? How do the adventures Walt experiences contrast to his outlook on his life at home? What does Walt experience in Djaruba that he doesn’t get to experience anywhere else? How does being a mapmaker make Walt extraordinary?

### CREATOR VS. CREATED

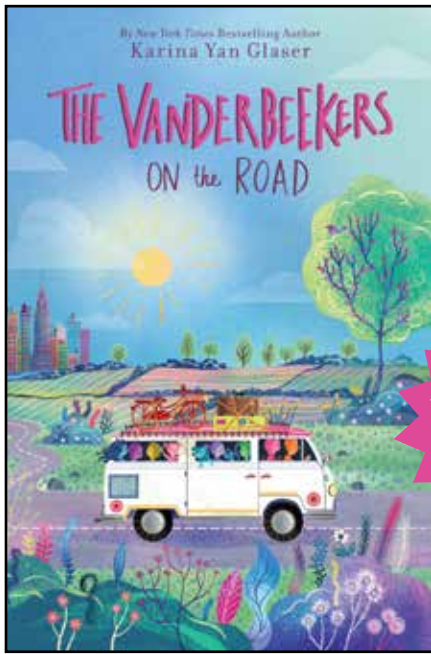
When entering the world of his maps, Walt is often taken by surprise by the reality of what he has created. Fenn says, “Do something! You’re a mapmaker! Fix it!” (p. 284). What instances indicate Walt’s surprise at the turn of events? When is he questioned by both Dylan, Van, and Fenn about his creations? How does what Walt has imagined turn out differently than he had hoped? As the creator of the map, how does Walt demonstrate that he has power to control outcomes?

### HEROISM

*Mapmaker* is an unpredictable, exciting adventure story with many twisting plots and turns. Walt says, “This saving-the-world business is exhausting. Someone should really warn us about that next time” (p. 293-294). What example of heroism can you recount from Lisa Moore Rameé’s novel? How did Walt, Van, Dylan, Fenn, and Heket the dragon work as a team to destroy the grip Statica has on the world?



Guide created by Esther H. Ra, Ed.D., CCMC, M.A., lecturer on education, university career advisor, literacy specialist, and certified teacher.



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# THE VANDERBEEKERS ON the ROAD

by Karina Yan Glaser

BOOK  
TALK

The Vanderbeekers, Mr. B., Orlando, and their pets, who hail from New York City, create an anthology of memories traveling cross-country on an unforgettable journey. Their initial stop is to wish their beloved dad, Derek, who is stuck in Indiana, a happy birthday, and they must do it before his birthday ends. Their drive from New York City to Indiana was anything but uneventful, yet together, through mishaps and “bumps” along the road, they arrive to wish Papa a wonderful birthday just as the night ends. After picking up Papa and visiting with Uncle Sylvester, Aunt Amelia, and cousin Sabine on their Indiana farm, they are on their way to Monterey, California, where Aunt Penny lives, and where they also encounter more delightful

adventures. *The Vanderbeekers On the Road* is a familial novel about expecting the unexpected, embracing change, neighborly kindness, and humanity.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### GRIT

The Vanderbeekers pull together in times of trouble. Sleeping conditions are not perfect while they are on the road. However, they make the best of every situation. On their road trip journey, where do you notice their grit and willingness to be patient even in less than stellar circumstances? For example, Isa notices, “The seats were so worn down that the leather was ripped; yellow foam bled out and exposed coils jabbed into her thigh. She [Isa] was never going to complain about Ludwig [their van] again” (p. 92). Where else do you see examples of grit during the Vanderbeekers journey?

### FAMILY TIES

The Vanderbeekers have strong family ties. Throughout Glaser’s novel, Laney is in distress as she “cannot live without her sisters” (p.53) and concocts a plan to thwart Jessie’s and Orlando’s chances at receiving a scholarship at Berkeley, which is thousands of miles away from New York City. How do Laney and her siblings scheme to divert their chances? What other evidence of close family ties do you see? How do Mr. B. and Orlando fit into the picture as part of the extended Vanderbeeker family?

### CITY VS. THE COUNTRY

Jessie wonders at one point, “what she and her siblings would be like if they had grown up in the middle of the country instead of in a huge city. Would Laney have a horse? Would Oliver be driving a pickup truck?” (p. 80). In what instances do you see the Vanderbeekers of New York City experiencing

a new culture outside their norm? What mesmerizes the Vanderbeekers about the countryside as they travel westward? What unfamiliar sights and sounds do they observe? What do the Vanderbeekers find interesting and what are they in disbelief about?

### NEIGHBORLY KINDNESS

On the road trip journey, the Vanderbeekers meet many wonderful, helpful neighbors along the way. One such person was Mr. Williams in Indiana, who says, “Happy to help a friend of Sue’s” (p. 98-99). Who are some of these neighbors and why did they meet them? What kinds of help did the Vanderbeekers need and how was it provided? What kinds of animals do they also meet as a result of neighborly kindness?

### TEAMWORK

Glaser writes poignantly about the “teamwork” aspect of the Vanderbeekers road trip. Often, heads are brought together to achieve a result. For example, “Jessie and Orlando worked on their applications all afternoon... They read each other’s responses, gave feedback, and rewrote portions over and over again” (p. 117). Who are the “teammates” Glaser depicts throughout the book? What big and small projects do these “teams” work on together? What are their goals? Sometimes such “teamwork” even included plans to impede opportunities for beloved siblings. Name all the “teams” laid out in the book and what they were planning together.

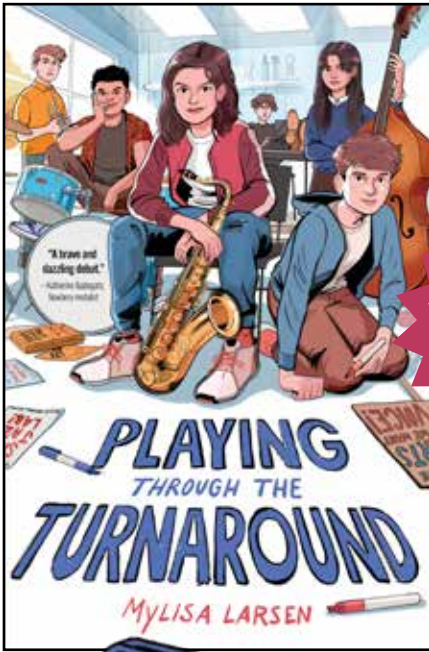


Guide created by Esther H. Ra, Ed.D., CCMC, M.A., lecturer on education, university career advisor, literacy specialist, and certified teacher.



# PLAYING THROUGH THE TURNAROUND

by Mylisa Larsen



Art © 2022 by Chris Danger

**BOOK TALK**

For the five eighth-graders in Jazz Lab with Mr. Lewis, the class is the best thing in their lives. No matter how hard things are at home, “It’s a good day whenever it’s Jazz Lab day.” They improvise, learn to listen, and burn up the room with their playing. So when they find out that Mr. Lewis has mysteriously left and that the school board wants to cut classes like music, art, and shop, the Jazz Lab kids decide to fight back. With more and more students joining the cause, the five musicians and an outsider named Quagmire plan a protest so big that the adults might finally listen. As they make music and make waves together, their friendships—and some romantic feelings—grow stronger. Can eighth graders get adults to pay attention and change? Readers will stand up and root for them all the way to the heart-thumping finale.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### LISTENING

“YOU, DON’T LISTEN TO US” (p. 180). That’s what the Jazz Lab students and Quag put on the backdrop for the concert. The list is long of adults who don’t listen. Describe the School Board meeting and why the students felt ignored. Which of the Jazz Lab kids feel their parents don’t pay attention to who they really are? Give specific examples where parents and Principal Deming don’t listen. How does listening tie into Lily’s decision to shave her head? Talk about Lily’s thoughts on pp. 76-77 about being heard. How is listening an important part of playing jazz together?

### ACTIVISM AND TEAMWORK

In the theater, Quag sees a sign with the “pathetically cheerful slogan *TEAM: Together Everyone Achieves More*” (p. 83). Yet how do he and the Jazz Lab kids find this to be true when it comes to protesting about school cuts? How does their petition bring other students into the cause? What makes the student council members join in? Discuss Mac’s conversation with his sister about his decision to break rules. Was the plan to disrupt the school concert justifiable? When the Jazz Lab kids are called to the office for their punishment, why do many other students go with them?

### NOT JUST TEST SCORES

The school board is focused on student test scores but many students find classes and extracurricular activities even more important than core courses. Which teachers seem to understand the students’ point of view? What are some of the classes and activities that students at the school value besides Jazz Lab? Why do those activities matter? What does Mac

learn about classes and activities that were cut in recent years? Why is Jazz Lab so important to the five students? Give examples that show the power of music for individuals and for larger groups.

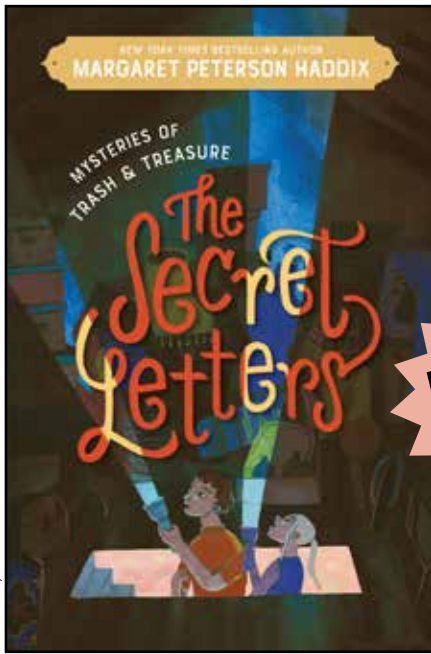
### FRIENDSHIP

How do lunch tables reflect friendship in the novel? Why do kids wonder why Lily would “get to be” Cassie’s best friend (p. 9)? How did they become friends? Why does Lily think Cassie needs her? What shows that Nick is now friends with Jake and Mac? Why does it matter so much to him? Describe Nick and Quag’s relationship and how it changes. Why does Jake think, “Being friends with Quag has its definite downsides” (p. 91)? What are some of the upsides for Jake and the others in being friends with Quag? Why doesn’t Quag have other friends?

### TRUST & SAFETY

Talk about the role of trust in the novel. Trust is a big issue for Cassie because, as Lily bluntly says to her, “Your dad lies” (p. 171). What promises does Cassie’s father break? How does it affect Cassie’s life and how she feels? Why do you think he does it? Why does Lily associate trust in her own life with safety and jumping into water? Why does Jazz Lab sometimes feel like the “sunny dock” from her childhood (p. 33)? In what way does she feel she can’t trust her father anymore? Relate the keys that Quag takes to the topic of trust.





# The Secret Letters

by Margaret Peterson Haddix

## BOOK TALK

You might not think an old shoebox could change a summer. But that's exactly what happens when Colin goes to work with his mother, clearing people's houses of old possessions. In a dusty attic, Colin discovers a hidden shoebox of letters written by a boy named Toby in the 1970s. When Colin tries to figure out who Toby was, he has to let Neveah, whose "Junk King" father also clears out houses, in on the secret. And so starts a summer of becoming great friends as Colin and Neveah uncover the past. The mystery about a boy and girl who exchanged letters so long ago—and abruptly quit being friends—merges with a present-day puzzle about missing antiques. Along the way it becomes clear that everyone has secrets: Colin and Neveah, his mother, Neveah's parents and siblings, and the people in the past who start to seem so real to the new friends.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### FRIENDSHIP

Two friendships are at the heart of this novel. Discuss how the two friendships are similar and how they are different. Describe how Colin and Neveah meet, and what they have in common. How are they different in terms of family and personality? What makes their friendship work well? How do they handle conflict in their friendship? What do they learn through reading the letters about the friendship between Rosemary and Toby? How do Colin and Neveah go beyond the letters to learn more? In the end, what happens with the now grown-up Rosemary and Toby?

### SECRETS

Secrets fill this story. Discuss the observation that Colin's mother makes: "Sometimes you just have to let people keep their own secrets" (p.24). Why do Neveah and Colin keep their friendship a secret? Why did Toby and Rosemary hide their letters? Why does Colin's mother have secrets about his father? How does Colin feel about not knowing? What does he eventually learn? What secrets has Neveah's mother kept from Neveah's father that emerge near the end? Why are Prilla and Roddy keeping their college hopes secret? Which secrets cause problems between people? Are some beneficial? How are trust and secrets related?

### FEMINISM & SEXISM

Rosemary is frustrated in the 1970s with the sexism and limits on women she sees around her. What does she hope to do when she grows up that women haven't done before? Neveah also encounters sexism, in the present day. Give examples from both time periods including how Steve treats Rosemary.

How does Rosemary, as an adult, describe what happened to Maribel in her marriage? What do you think happened between Colin's father and his mother? How has Rosemary used Maribel's money to help women including Colin's and Neveah's mothers?

### POSSESSIONS

Colin's mother and Neveah's father are both in the business of dealing with other people's possessions. Describe their businesses. How are the businesses similar and how are they different? Describe their two households and how they differ in terms of possessions. Why does Neveah's father say, "People are almost never logical about their possessions" (p.29)? Why does Colin's mother believe that possessions tie a person down? What does she mean by the word "curation" in relationship to possessions? Why is Neveah attracted to that viewpoint? How do Colin's photographs capture a different view of possessions?

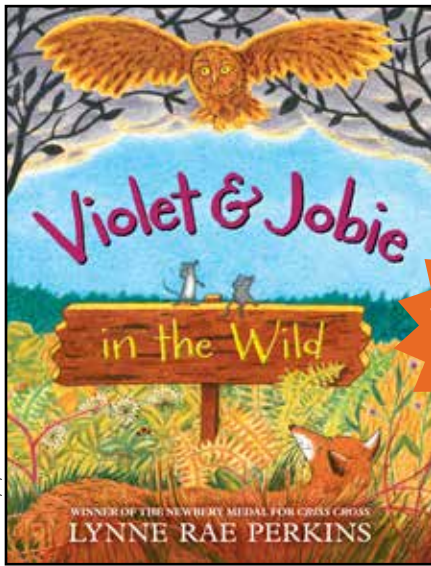
### PAST AND PRESENT

What do Neveah and Colin learn about the 1970s through the letters and research? How does it change the way they look at their own lives and possessions? Highlight some contrasts between their lives and those of Rosemary and Toby including cell phones and the internet. Why does Neveah say about an old spoon, "I bet it'd be worth more if you knew its whole history" (p.138)? Explain "provenance" and why it can change an item's value. Why does Colin feel, after talking to people near Toby's childhood home, that "he could see layers of history in the neighborhood" (p.199)?



# Violet & Jobie in the Wild

by Lynne Rae Perkins



Art © 2022 by Lynne Rae Perkins

BOOK  
TALK

Young mice Violet and Jobie are sister and brother but also best of friends. They're used to a pretty easy life, raiding mousetraps, eating crumbs, and even watching television, unknown to the human family around them. So when they're caught and abruptly deposited in the woods, they count on each other to survive. What do mice eat when there's no kitchen? Where do they sleep to avoid foxes? The siblings sharpen their problem-solving skills with the help of a kind old mouse named Zolian. Scared as they are of predators, the two also start to have fun with other young mice, joking around and leaf-surfing. But more adventures lie ahead as their new life keeps changing in unexpected and sometimes dangerous ways.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### RELATIONSHIPS

For most of the story, the most important relationship is between Violet and Jobie, who are siblings and also friends. How can you tell they care about each other? How do you know they also enjoy each other? How are they similar and how are they different? Describe the friendship that grows up between Violet and Zolian. Why does he mean a lot to her? Why does Jobie like Iris? What is Violet's reaction to Jobie's news about wanting to "start a family?" How does Violet end up with Ebba, and what do they have in common?



### ADVENTURES

What makes something an adventure? The characters choose some of the adventures they have, while others are out of their control. How do Violet and Jobie end up in the woods? Describe how they adjust to their new life. Leaf-surfing is an exciting activity they choose. Why do they like it? Recount Zolian's adventure with the beavers, Violet's adventure riding a rabbit, and why each of them made their choice. How did Ebba come to leave home? Why do you think Violet isn't sorry when she ends up traveling with Ebba?

### FEAR & COURAGE

Talk about Violet's comment after they escape the fox: "If we pretend we're brave, we can be brave" (p. 39). Give some examples of when Violet, Jobie, and the other mice have good reasons to be afraid. What is it like to be small in a world where their predators are much larger? How do they sometimes use their size to stay safe? Discuss Zolian's advice that "There's always an owl . . . but there are ways to live so that you're not always afraid of the owl" (p.62). How do Jobie, Violet, and Zolian all show courage?



### PROBLEM-SOLVING

Finding themselves in the unfamiliar woods, Violet and Jobie show they are good at problem-solving. What steps do they take to try to survive their first night? How do they find food? How do they find and fix up a home? Describe Violet's innovation with foliage that helps hide them as they move seeds. Where does Violet get her idea about riding the rabbit, and how does it solve a problem for her? How does she deal with trying to find her way home from seeing the cranes?

### LEARNING

What are some of the things that Violet and Jobie learn from Zolian? How does he go about teaching them to survive in the woods? Describe his approach of looking and then listening, and how that proves helpful to the newcomers. How and why do the three of them use abbreviations like Always Be Careful? What are some other abbreviations they know or invent? What does Zolian learn from Violet and Jobie? Discuss his comment, "I guess I still have a few things to learn" (p. 88). What does that attitude tell you about him?

Guide created by Kathleen Odean, who's been a school librarian for more than 15 years and gives professional development workshops for educators about children's and YA books. Kathleen chaired the Newbery Medal Committee and served on the Caldecott Committee.