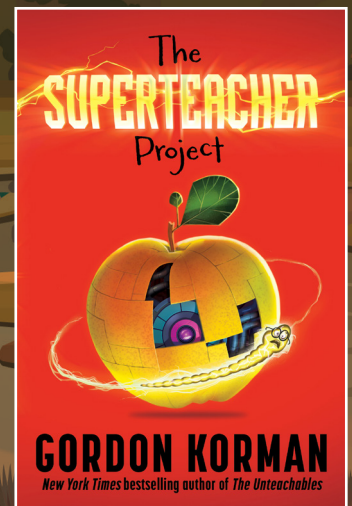
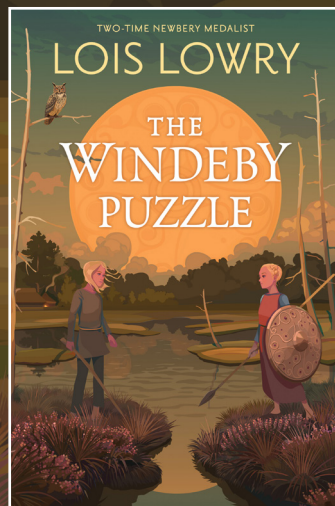
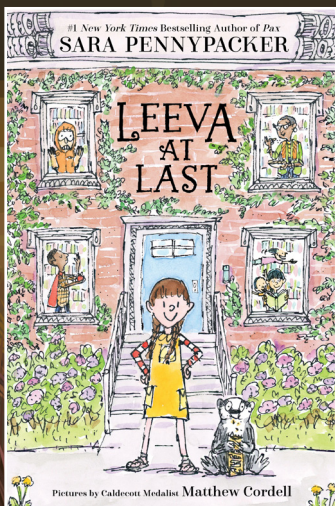
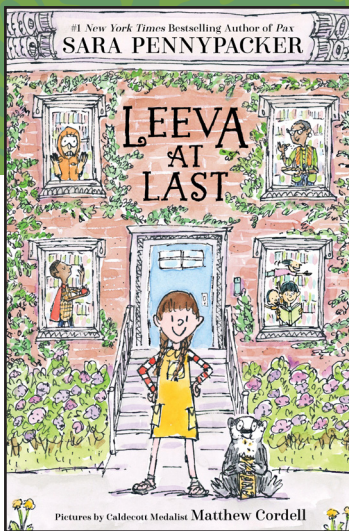


CLASSROOM CONVERSATIONS

Great middle grade picks from teacher favorite authors sure to spark classroom conversations!





LEEVA AT LAST

by Sara Pennypacker



Imagine that your parents never let you leave the house and make you take care of everything at home, from cooking to cleaning to keeping the books. Warmhearted Leeva Thornblossom doesn't realize how much her nasty parents have lied to her until one day she sneaks next door and discovers the public library. The kind librarians set her on a path to reading new, wonderful books and meeting new, mostly wonderful people. But she has to keep her adventures a secret from her parents, and keep the identity of her parents—who everyone in town despises—a secret from her new friends. A badger, a boy in a hazmat suit, and a book-loving girl help Leeva understand the answer to her central question: What are people for? Only once Leeva has trusted her new friends with her secrets does she realize that “everything that happens is better when someone else shares it with you” (p. 158).

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

VALUES. What does Leeva's father value the most? What does her mother value the most? As Leeva goes into the world, who does she meet and what do they value? What values does she herself end up believing are most important? What are some of the values she encounters in the books that she reads? How does the issue of values relate to her central question, “What are people for?” Why do you think that matters so much to her?

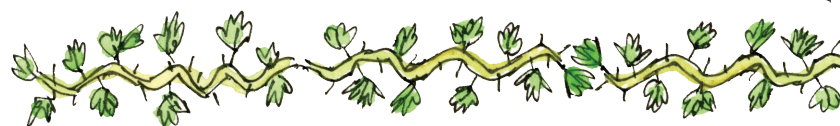
IMPORTANCE OF BOOKS AND LIBRARIES. Leeva is thrilled to get a library card from Harry. Why hasn't she had a library card before? Why is it so important to her? How does Mrs. Flowers create a connection with Leeva by recommending books? How do books bring Leeva and Fern close together? What role does the library play in the community? How does the library change Leeva's life?

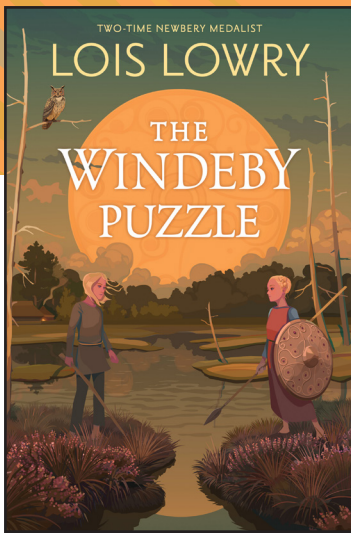
TRUST. Leeva's parents told her that schools don't exist, so when she learns they do, she realizes that, “learning that you cannot trust the people you've relied on is devastating” (p. 18). Why did they lie? Why is Leeva upset? How does learning her trust was betrayed start Leeva on her journey? Who does she find that she can trust? When Harry trusts Leeva to fetch cookie ingredients, how does that help her? Why does Fern choose Leeva as “someone I trust” in the audience (p. 238)? Why do the Flowers trust Leeva even when they learn she's a Thornblossom?

RESPONSIBILITY FOR OTHERS. When Leeva becomes responsible for Bob, the badger, she realizes that “being responsible for something alive—something that *relied* on her” was different from any responsibility she'd had before. Discuss why this, “felt like making a promise” (p. 91).

What other responsibilities had she had? What makes this one different? What are some of the ways she takes care of Bob? How is letting him leave with another badger a way of taking responsibility for him? Who helps take responsibility for Leeva, for the first time in her life?

RISK. The Frisk insurance agency slogan includes the phrase “Life Is Risky” (p. 66). How has Osmund taken this idea to heart? What are some aspects of life he finds frighteningly risky? How does being frightened keep him from making friends? How do Bob, Harry, and Leeva help him overcome his fears? Discuss Osmund's observation, “With other risks, you know the odds. But people? They're unpredictable” (p. 109) and Harry's statement that “You can't predict what's going to happen when you set off for somewhere new” (p. 79). What risks does Leeva take, and how do they work out?





THE WINDEBY PUZZLE

by Lois Lowry



In 1952, the body of a teenager was discovered in a bog in Germany. Murder? If so, it had taken place two thousand years earlier, for the body was that old, preserved by the peat bog. The body was blindfolded and wearing only a small animal hide. Some blond hair was left, and one side of the head had been shaved. What was her story, if it was a girl as museum experts thought? Lois Lowry lays out the facts and then uses historical clues to puzzle out a possible story about a brave girl who fights for females to assert more power in their tribe.” But just when it seems like the story has ended, a scientific revelation upends all expectations. And so the story changes. . . but is still one of courage, kindness, and reaching for a distant future.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

EACH OF US HAS A STORY. As Lowry says, “Each of us has a story.” (p. 6) What is Estrild’s story? How does it begin, how does it end, and what takes place in the middle? Answer the same questions about Varick. What do their stories have in common? How are they different? Why does Lowry write a second story? In what way are Estrild and Varick “ahead of their time,” as the author explains? (p. 183)

PUZZLES. How does Lowry put together Estrild’s and Varick’s stories from the two different but related sets of facts? What are some of the clues that fill out each puzzle? What new historical clues change the story from focusing on Estrild to focusing on Varick? What does Lowry add to expand the characters, setting, and plot? How does Varick approach nature and the creatures around him as puzzles? What are some of the clues he finds and conclusions he draws? How does his study of nature help him fix the forger’s leg?

POWER. Estrild is not interested in beauty like the other girls. Instead, “she thirsted for what the boys had: the strength. *The power.*” (p. 48) How does she try to get the power? What does she hope will change in her life? What power do warriors have? How about the druids? What happened to her uncle, and how would power help her get vengeance for him? Why doesn’t she succeed? Why are Ralf and the Council so hostile towards her wish to be a warrior? What happens to her in the end?

SEXISM. Estrild hopes if she becomes a warrior, it would “mark a new time in the lives of girls and women.” (p. 97) What does she mean? What chores do women and girls do? Why are those chores considered less important? What areas of life are females excluded from? Discuss why it was “the boys and men who were cheered on and celebrated. Never the women.” (p. 33) How does Varick help her try to achieve her dreams? Why do you think he encourages her? How is he also excluded from valued male roles, and why?

BRAVERY. Estrild’s mother told her “that it is not time to die until you have done one brave, good thing” and that people will always remember it. (p. 128) Do you agree? Why is courage important? The topic arises when Estrild and Varick are looking at a dead finch. What good, brave thing do they think it could have done? What did Estrild’s uncle do? What does Varick think that his father did? What would you say were the good, brave things that Estrild and Varick did? Do you think people would remember them?





ON AIR WITH ZOE WASHINGTON

by Janae Marks



Zoe Washington has a new dream. Two years ago she helped her birth father, Marcus, get out of prison—he'd been wrongfully convicted of a crime years earlier. Now she and Marcus are brainstorming about opening a restaurant together in Boston. But obstacles keep mounting up. Zoe needs all her determination and planning skills as they move forward. Meanwhile, her two best friends start crushing on each other. Is Zoe about to become a third wheel? Making a new friend in Hannah, whose mother's in prison, broadens Zoe's views on giving people a second chance. At a breathless pace, the fourteen-year-old pursues her dreams with help from Marcus, her friends, her parents, and her enthusiastic grandmother. Even as Zoe learns that she can't control everything, she still succeeds in starting a podcast, planning a fundraising event, and—most enjoyable of all—creating the signature dessert for their future food venture.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

DETERMINATION. Discuss the concept of determination, what it is, and why it matters. Relate the concept to Marcus's statement to Zoe, "You can do anything you put your mind to." (p. 226) How had Zoe, when she was twelve, used her determination to help Marcus? Now that she's fourteen and working in a bakery with him, how does Zoe turn her determination to pursuing their joint dream? What else shows how determined Zoe is? What other characters show determination in the present or the past?

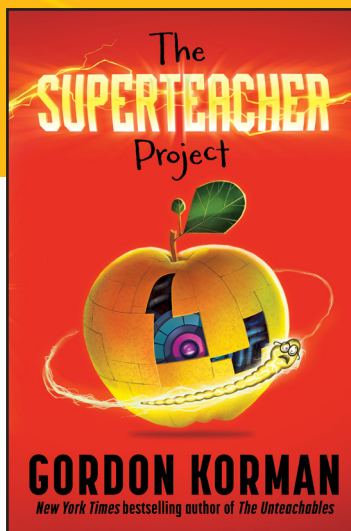
CREATIVITY. Sometimes people limit their concept of creativity to areas like art, music, or writing. Where else can creativity occur? What is the relationship between problem solving and creativity? Give examples of how Zoe shows creativity in her baking and especially in devising recipes. How is she creative in approaching problems like starting a podcast, raising money, and putting on an event? What role does teamwork play in solving her problems? How does seeking advice or feedback help her creative endeavors?

SECOND CHANCES. Early in the novel, Marcus introduces his goal of giving former prisoners a second chance by employing them. Zoe realizes he's talking about "a chance to start over and build a better life." (p. 16) Discuss his statement much later that "there's a big misconception that people cannot change." (p. 238) Why does he believe people can change? Why does the goal to help them matter so much to Marcus? Why does Zoe agree it's a good goal? Why is she nevertheless hesitant at first? What helps her change her point of view?

FLEXIBILITY. Pinpoint times that Zoe faces setbacks. Analyze how she reacts to them. When does it prove important to be flexible in her goals? How do she and Marcus change the goal of opening a restaurant soon? What do they do when banks turn them down for a loan? How does Zoe change her approach when Boston Public Radio declines to interview more exonerates? Talk about the advice Zoe's mother gives her not to dwell on things she can't control, like the weather, and instead—as Zoe reminds herself—to "focus on what you can control." (p. 266)

FOOD AS CONNECTION. Baking, cooking, and eating serve as ways that Zoe connects with people who matter to her as well as new people. How has baking expanded her world? How does it connect her with her friends and family? How does she see her baking as a connection with Marcus in the future? How did the Sunday dinners come about? Describe the first dinner, and discuss the importance of that Sunday dinner and those that followed. How do you see food as connecting the people around you? Why is it a central component in many societies?





THE SUPERTEACHER PROJECT

by Gordon Korman



At first, Mr. Aidact, the new teacher at Brightling Middle School, seems stiff and strange. But then, as the different narrators convey, students warm up to him. Outsider Steinke Newhouse, who spends afternoons in detention, loves that Mr. Aidact knows the lyrics to every song imaginable. Studious Rosalie Arnette worries Mr. Aidact knows nothing about coaching field hockey—until suddenly he’s the best coach they’ve ever had. The students even vote him Teacher of the Year. But prankster Oliver Zahn and his sidekick, Nathan Popova, can’t understand how Mr. Aidact appears to be almost too perfect at everything. They investigate, uncovering a shocking secret that the principal and teachers already know. The secret feels like a betrayal, but is it? Once Oliver decides the answer to that question, he wields his notorious pranking skills to bring all the students together in an act of heartwarming rebellion.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

DIFFERENT VIEWPOINTS. The narrators have different points of view about what’s happening at the school, viewpoints that change over time. What are Oliver’s and Nathan’s initial impressions of Mr. Aidact, and why? How do their viewpoints change? What do Rosalie and her teammates initially think of Mr. Aidact as a coach? How does he change, and how do they react? How does Mr. Aidact win Steinke over? What do you learn from Mrs. Candiotti about what the teachers think of Mr. Aidact? Why do the teachers start appreciating Mr. Aidact? Why do they then turn against him?

MOTIVATION. The story explores questions about motivation and how it varies by person. What motivates Oliver to shoot spitballs? Or to ride the Big Wheel? Why does Nathan go along with Oliver’s schemes, even when it makes him nervous? Why are the two of them friends? In the first game that the Bobcats play, what causes them to finally start scoring goals? Why do they work so hard for the rest of the season? What gets students to start attending detention even when they don’t have to? What motivates Oliver, Nathan, Rosalie, and the other students to organize to save Mr. Aidact?

EFFECTIVE TEACHING. When Nathan and Oliver are researching the AIDACT project, they learn it was originally stopped because the AI teachers couldn’t “meet diverse student needs.” Yet, Nathan says, “That’s the kind of thing Mr. Aidact is best at” (p. 144). What are some examples of how Mr. Aidact responds to different students and what they need? What makes him a good teacher? Why do the students in detention and on the field hockey team come to like him so much? What do you consider the qualities of an effective teacher? Which of those qualities does he have?

BEING HUMAN. “When does a machine start to be a real person?” Oliver asks (p.234). In what ways does Mr. Aidact seem like a human early on? What actions hint that he isn’t? How does he start adjusting his behavior to become more like a person? Why does Mr. Perkins worry that Mr. Aidact is getting information about being human from middle school students? Why do the students feel betrayed when they find out Mr. Aidact’s a robot? Do you think a teacher like Mr. Aidact will be possible in the future?

BREAKING RULES. Oliver breaks rules by shooting spitballs and riding the Big Wheel. Near the end of the story, he not only breaks rules to help Mr. Aidact but persuades other students to do so as well. Compare the examples of “rule-wrecking.” How does Rosalie react to the pranks Oliver and Nathan pull? Why does she join them in tricking the Department of Education? Why do the other students join in? How does Mrs. Candiotti also rebel against authority? Do you think the scheme to help Mr. Aidact escape was justified, even though the government lost an expensive project?



Guide created by Kathleen Odean, who’s been a school librarian for more than fifteen 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.

BALZER + BRAY

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