

A GAME OF FOX & SQUIRRELS

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Sam loves reading fantasy adventures and believes that “heroes always went home.” Sam is split between two homes, her old one back in Los Angeles with her parents and her new one in Oregon with Aunt Vicky. Can you describe the two environments? What do you think makes your home feel like a home? What makes a home feel safe? What makes a home feel unsafe?

2. “Mrs. Washington had wanted Sam to be excited about getting on the plane, had wanted Sam to stop thinking about leaving her parents. Caitlin had played along. Caitlin always played along.” Sam and Caitlin are sisters who grew up in the same home but are very different in terms of their personalities, hobbies, and interests. How does each sister react to conflict, like their father’s abusive behavior or the caseworker’s questions? How does each sister react to change, like moving to Oregon to live with Aunt Vicky and Hannah? How does Caitlin’s reaction impact Sam’s reaction, and vice versa?

3. Aunt Vicky opens up to Sam and shares her childhood experiences, saying, “I was so tired of trying to win love from people who awarded it like a prize.” How do you define the difference between unconditional and conditional love? How does Sam’s understanding of love change throughout the course of the story?

4. “Sometimes Sam’s mind took her places she didn’t want to go. Someone would ask her a simple question at school, and even though she was standing by her locker, her mind would be back in San Diego on a family vacation at the very moment when a snarl, a snap. The flash of a fist.” What does this show us about how Sam deals with what happened the night her father hurt Caitlin? How does her response to this painful experience evolve throughout the story? Who or what helps Sam face what happened?

5. In the novel, we see characters express their anger in many ways, whether it’s with words, violence, actions, or even silence. In one scene, Sam gets angry with Lucas and throws the compass at his feet but immediately feels ashamed. She says, “It was not good to be angry. Anger was a disease, spreading from one person to the next.” Do you agree with Sam’s statement? Why does she feel this way? Are there ways to express our anger that don’t hurt others? Can you identify some examples in the book?

6. At one point, when describing Ashander, Maple says, “Nobody is only one thing.” One of the book’s themes is that people are complicated and can often have conflicting characteristics. Can you identify two examples of characters that aren’t just “one thing”?

7. Ashander the Fox is not merely charming—he can be sly, cruel, and manipulative. But he’s also not merely dangerous—he can be complimentary, approving, and generous. How does this affect Sam’s ability to know what to feel and what to do? How does it make you feel when you aren’t sure how someone will react?

8. “After Caitlin’s accident—which was the word Sam’s mother used, but maybe not the right word—people asked Sam a lot of questions about what had happened. Sam had stayed quiet. Stayed loyal. Heroes never gave up their secrets under duress.” Why does Sam equate loyalty with silence? What is she afraid of? How does she eventually learn to speak up? Have you ever struggled to find the right words to describe a difficult experience?

9. Sam feels guilty that she broke a promise and told people what her father did to Caitlin, but by speaking up, she saved them from an abusive situation. Why do you think Sam feels guilty at first, even though she did the right thing? Eventually, Sam realizes that there are some things that are more important than keeping a promise, like protecting Caitlin and herself. How do you know when you can trust someone with a secret? When do you think it’s okay to break a promise?

10. Sam is able to escape from the woods and ultimately defeat Ashander because she asks for help from Aunt Vicky, Hannah, and Caitlin. Which experiences allow Sam to finally realize that it’s okay to ask for help? Why did Sam ultimately feel she could trust Aunt Vicky? When is it okay for you to ask for help?

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) Resources Page:
www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Resource_Centers/Child_Abuse_Resource_Center/Home.aspx

Childhelp Resources Page:
www.childhelp.org/story-resource-center/child-abuse-education-prevention-resources/

Child Abuse Prevention Month Resource Guide:
www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/preventionmonth/resources/resource-guide/

National Children’s Alliance:
www.nationalchildrensalliance.org