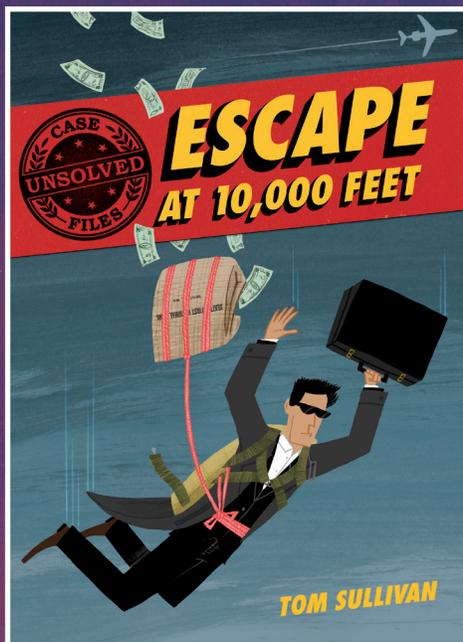
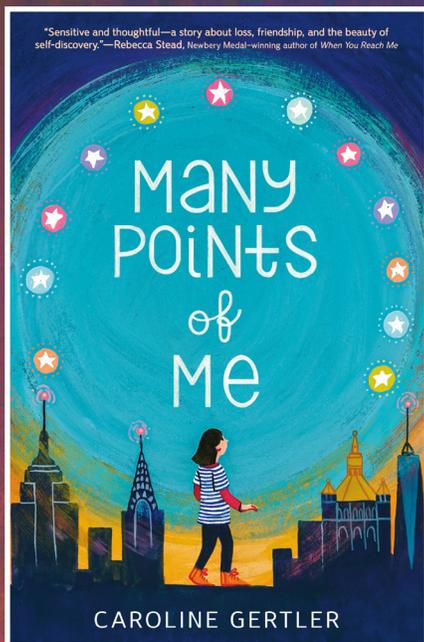
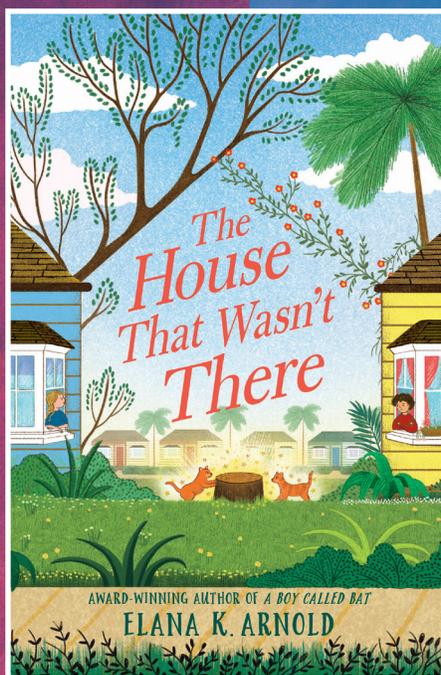
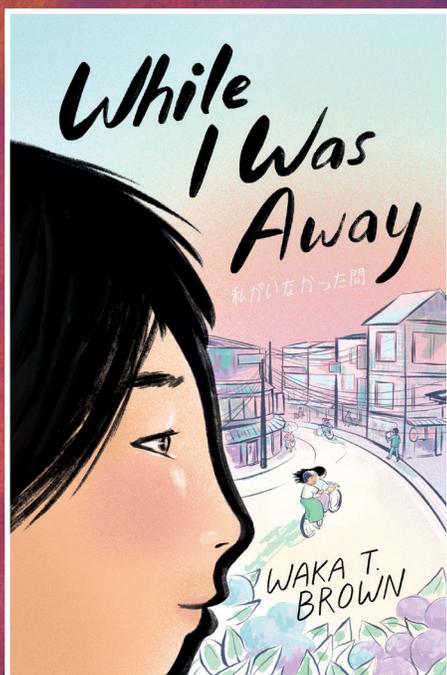


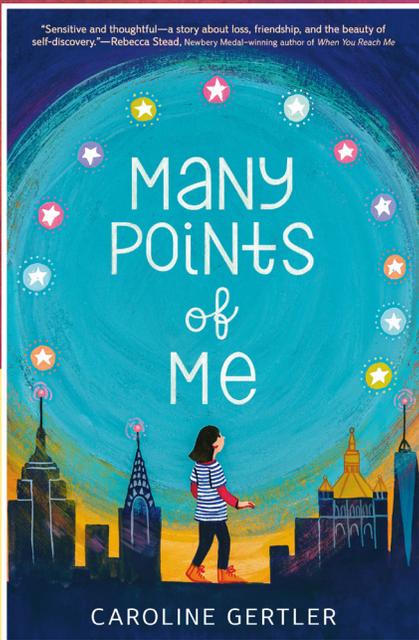
Great Picks

for Your Middle Grade Book Club



Featuring booktalks, thematic discussion questions, and tips on how to run a successful book club for middle grade readers!





Many Points of Me

by Caroline Gertler

Booktalk

The daughter of an illustrious artist, twelve-year-old Georgia Rosenbloom grapples with living in the shadow of her dad's legacy after he suddenly passes away from cancer. She is constantly reminded of him everywhere, particularly when she goes to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, where she has countless memories with him. To Georgia, he was more than a famous painter; he was the father who loved her. After his death, Georgia struggles to understand how to continue living without her dad. Her family, comprised of her mom and neighbors, walks alongside her to navigate life after her dad's death, while Georgia searches for him through his art. What discoveries does Georgia make about her dad, and in doing so, about herself? How does Georgia deal with profound grief and navigate the changing landscape of friendships, while carving out her own artistic identity?

Questions for Group Discussion

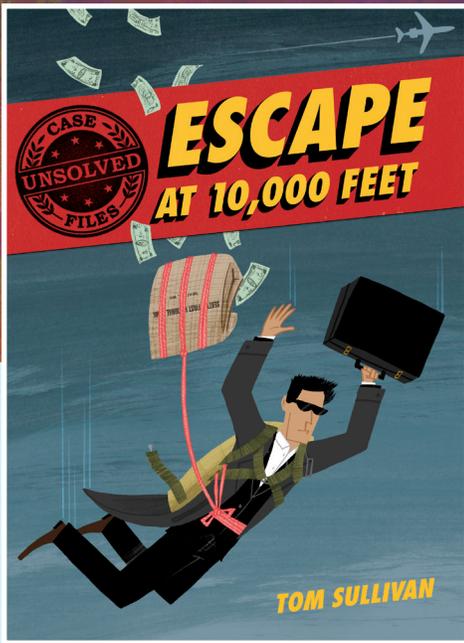
SEARCHING THROUGH GRIEF. Throughout the entirety of the novel, Georgia feels the depth of her father's loss, so much so that she is often overcome with the "Dad-piece that's missing" (p. 319). Her neighbor, Mrs. Velandry, observes, "The missing never goes away, does it? It just becomes a part of who you are" (p. 303). This could not be truer of Georgia and how much she longs for her dad. Where and how does she find comfort even after his passing? How does Georgia feel he is still "watching and still with me" (p. 300)?

FRIENDSHIP. Georgia's best friend, Theo, is a longtime neighbor and family friend. A budding artist, Theo enjoyed the company of Georgia's famous father when he was alive. How does Georgia's relationship with Theo become complicated after her dad's passing? How do jealousy and grief play off of each other? Georgia befriends a new group of girls whose friendships seem simpler, since they did not know her dad. How does Georgia wrestle with the juxtaposition of her old friendship with Theo and her new friendships with Harper and the Mermaids?

ART AND CREATIVITY. Georgia is known for her famous parents and the work that they do. However, Georgia is a blossoming artist in her own right. Everyone, including her mom, Theo, Mr. Butterweit, and Harper, remarks on her artistic talents and encourages her to develop them. Much to Georgia's chagrin, her intentions toward her own creativity become muddled when her dad passes away. How does Georgia's relationship with art evolve throughout the chapters? How does Theo's alter ego, comic-book depiction of Georgia as "Super G" (p. 5) resonate with the way Georgia sees herself at the end of the book?

FAMILY. Georgia's "family" is one that may look different than the traditional family. She has her mother, an art history professor, but she also leans on her vigilant neighbor Mrs. Velandry and her pets, as well as her reliable family friends, Theo and his mom Harriet, who also happens to be her mom's best friend. How might the idea of family have been reshaped by her dad's death? Though they are not related by blood, how does Georgia's "family" rise to help her cope with her dad's passing?

DISCOVERY. Georgia makes an astounding discovery of her father's asterism points on an unfinished piece of art, of which she is the final subject. In discovering this, Georgia also finds a piece of herself in her father, and thus a deeper connection and joy to her dad's love and legacy. How does she "feel connected" to her dad by being with his art (p. 135)? In addition, how does the discovery of her father's asterism points on the canvas paintings symbolize the connection of the different parts of Georgia's life after her father's death?



Unsolved Case Files: Escape at 10,000 Feet: D.B. Cooper and the Missing Money

by Tom Sullivan

Booktalk

On November 24, 1971, a man dressed in a black business suit and overcoat enters the Portland International Airport in Portland, Oregon. The man proceeds to the ticket counter, identifies himself as Dan Cooper, and purchases a one-way ticket to Seattle, Washington. After boarding and taking his assigned seat in the last row, he calmly hands a note to the flight attendant. It read: *Miss—I have a bomb here. I would like you to sit by me.* She complies, and looks on in horror as the man opens his briefcase to reveal what appears to be a bomb. The man proceeds to present a list of demands, including \$200,000. If authorities do not comply with his wishes, he will detonate the bomb, killing everyone on board. What follows is one of the most amazing and puzzling unsolved crime mysteries of the 20th century, including a mid-air event that is almost too startling to believe. But believe it, because *Escape at 10,000 Feet* is true, every word of it.

Questions for Group Discussion

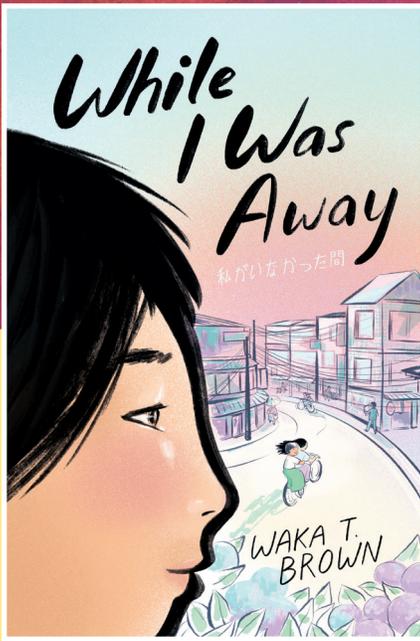
EVIDENCE. This book is filled with reproductions of maps and other ephemera, diagrams of the plane, and crime scene evidence to help create the sense of leafing through a file. How are these different types of materials used in an investigation? How do the smallest details help to further a theory or disprove it altogether? What are primary sources? Why are they so important?

CRIME. What aspects of Cooper's crime, as it unfolded, had he not planned or accounted for? What unintended consequences of his decisions played a role in his crime and possibly his injury or probable death? Discuss how the various players in this true-crime story responded to Cooper's demands. Do you think they made the right decisions? Why or why not? Research the role of the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) and how the agency works to keep United States citizens safe.

MYSTERY & SUSPENSE. Discuss some of the case's still unanswered questions, such as where the explosive device went, the location of the parachutes, and the identity of Cooper himself. What is a theory? Which theories presented in Part Five seem most plausible? What do you think happened to Cooper and the rest of the ransom money? Why do unsolved crimes make such compelling stories to read and learn about? How do the illustrations add to the sense of mystery and suspense in this book? Select an illustration that you feel is the most powerful in building feelings of suspense.

RISK. Audacity means a willingness to take bold risks. How did Cooper act audaciously? Provide examples from the text. What must have Cooper believed would happen to allow him to take such bold risks? What do you think is the difference between risky behavior and courageous behavior? Provide some examples of each from the story. If Cooper could go back in time and commit the crime all over again, do you think he would? Why or why not? Do you think that \$200,000 was worth the risk?

FEAR. The illustrations in *Escape at 10,000 Feet* create a sense of an unfolding drama and investigation. Look back through the art. Which ones most successfully show the fear that the flight attendants experienced during this ordeal? Discuss how Ms. Mucklow and Ms. Schaffner handled their fear and other emotions as this crime was happening. Why do you think the illustrations of Cooper show him without expression? How did Cooper use fear as a tool in his plan? Why do you think that Cooper didn't want the other passengers to know that the plane was being hijacked? Do you think that Cooper was ever afraid of being caught or dying?



While I Was Away

by Waka T. Brown

Booktalk

Twelve-year-old Waka doesn't know what to think when her parents relay some startling news: She must go to Japan to live with her elderly grandmother at the start of summer vacation and stay for five months. Despite pleading not to go, Waka begrudgingly leaves for Japan, where she faces the culture shock of a lifetime. Waka leaves behind her familiar world in Kansas and must now figure out how to survive immersed in Japanese society. In Tokyo, on top of struggling with the language, Waka is forced to navigate the complex relationship with Obaasama, her stern and sometimes moody grandmother. She also has to attend Japanese school, where she feels like an outsider and gets made fun of by her classmates. How will Waka fare away from her family and friends? Where is home, and who will Waka be when she finally finds it?

Questions for Group Discussion

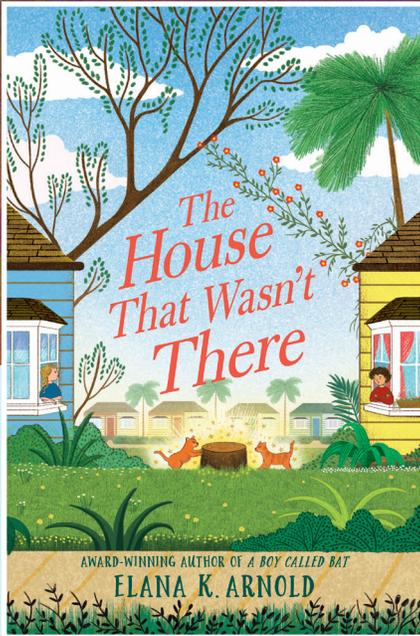
TWO WORLDS AND IDENTITIES. *While I Was Away* discusses the complex but dynamic experience of being caught between two worlds. Waka wonders about being “in this limbo” ... halfway between my Japanese life and my American one. Was it possible to be in both? Or would I end up being in neither?” (p. 205). Raised between two worlds, Waka struggles with her identity as an American in Japan. There, she is in a world that should feel familiar, but yet feels so foreign. What aspects of living in Japan make Waka feel like a foreigner, even though she's living in the country that belongs to her parents?

NAVIGATING CULTURE. Throughout the novel, Waka constantly questions how she should behave in Japan. Around Obaasama, she does not want to be the defiant American kid and often refrains from “talking back” for fear that she would appear disrespectful to her elder. Waka also does not want this to reflect poorly on her mother for having raised “that kind of kid” (p. 64). What are some instances where Waka shows restraint in her actions while in Japan, a country which prides itself on elder respect?

LANGUAGE LEARNING IN SCHOOL. Waka grows up speaking Japanese at home in America and excelling as a student in Kansas. However, in Japan, she feels as though she is the struggling foreigner who perpetually trails her classmates academically. Learning *kanji*, an incredibly complicated writing system, proves to be her arch nemesis. Discuss some of Waka's frustrations and progress navigating this new territory, and the ways she overcomes her language learning struggles.

FAMILY. Family relationships are intricate and sometimes thorny. Waka leaves her parents and siblings in America to live in Japan with her strict grandmother, Obaasama, who often appears cold and distant. What are some themes around family that surface throughout Brown's novel? What are her family relationships like in America as opposed to her relationships in Japan? How does Waka's complex relationship with Obaasama evolve throughout the book and serve as a backdrop to her time spent in Japan?

FRIENDSHIP. The juxtaposition of Waka's old friends in America and her new friends in Japan are interwoven throughout the chapters. Waka wonders how being a part of a *guruupu*, a friendship group in Japan, would change her life (p. 163). What does she miss about her old friends in America? What new friendship rules must she learn? What do you learn about her friendships in Japan through Midori, Naomi, Saito, and Yamashita? How does her friendship with Reiko fit into this paradigm? How does friendship in general seem to be defined differently in America and in Japan?



The House That Wasn't There

by Elana K. Arnold

Booktalk

Alder lives with his mom in a small house in a quiet neighborhood. He's lived there for as long as he can remember, as has the old walnut tree between his house and the one next door. And when a new family moves in and cuts down the tree to make room for a second-story addition, Alder and his mom are furious. He does his best to ignore the new neighbors, especially Oak, a girl his age and in his 6th grade class. Try as he might, this new girl is hard to ignore. Oak and Alder slowly become friends, linked together by two kittens, a mysterious phenomenon taking place at the stump of the walnut tree, and a growing sense of connection that is bigger than both of them.

Questions for Group Discussion

MEMORY. Alder doesn't remember much about his late father, except a certain smell: "a sort of sharp burning like a just-smoked cigarette mixed with something like the fresh scent of new-cut grass" (p. 2). How else does Alder hold on to his father through his senses? What changes for Alder when he remembers the tree but is no longer angry that it was cut down? Why is it so important for Beck to have the sweater completed?

FRIENDSHIP. Discuss Alder's feelings about Marcus and how their relationship changed between 5th and 6th grades. How does Oak help Alder accept the change? How do the kittens create a bridge for Alder and Oak's

friendship to grow? Alder realizes that a "friend wasn't something you could steal." (p. 223) How does Oak understanding Alder's feelings about Marcus make him feel better? Alder feels like a "hinge" joining his two groups of friends together (p. 251). Why is it a big responsibility being a "hinge?"

FAMILY. Discuss Oak's relationship with her mother. Why does Oak resent things being "decided without asking what she wanted?" (p. 35) Why are Oak's feelings hurt after her Mom changes her book rainbow (p. 69)? As Alder and Oak begin their connections project on Family, Oak notes that the kittens "sort of make[s] us family, too." (p. 123) What does she mean by "sort of?" Alder says to Oak, "Let's be friends." (p. 189) How is this simple statement like a magical charm? Discuss how Alder and Oak react when they discover they are related (p. 256).

WONDER AND MAGIC. While most of the story is realistic fiction, there are elements of magic as well. Discuss these parts of the story and how they create a sense of wonder. Alder tries hard to see the shimmer, but it keeps slipping away. Why does softening his gaze and "letting the world slip out of focus" make the shimmer reappear (p. 151)? What coincidences in the story could be described as magical or miraculous? On page 228, Oak wonders "What other secrets did the universe hold? If cats could portal hop and enemies could become friends, what else might be possible?" How is possibility like magic?

LOSS. Why does Alder "sort of love" to listen to his father sing and also "sort of hate it at the same time" (p. 7)? Discuss how the loss of the tree affects Alder and how it also creates a space to bring Alder, Oak, and eventually the two families together. Although Oak has not lost a parent, she struggles with loss in her own way. Discuss how moving, leaving behind friends, her home, and her school create feelings of sadness and grief. How does Oak show empathy for Alder's loss? How does her empathy help Alder in his grief? What does Mort mean when he tells Alder and Oak that "energy never dies (p. 243)?"



WALDEN POND PRESS
An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Tips for Organizing a Book Group:

THE FASTEST WAY TO ADVERTISE IS THROUGH WORD OF MOUTH. Recruit a few enthusiastic readers who are willing to get things started!

GIVE PARTICIPANTS OPTIONS AND LET THEM DECIDE. Pull a list of potential books and share information about them with your readers.

COME PREPARED WITH A FEW GOOD QUESTIONS, but let them drive the discussion. Begin each meeting by letting the kids introduce themselves and share their thoughts and initial impressions about the book. Let their conversation about the book start organically and use the questions if and when you need them.

DON'T BE AFRAID OF SILENCE. It can be scary to speak up for the first time—especially if you're new to the group—so don't feel the need to fill the silence with chatter. The quiet gives them some time to think about how to answer a question you offered or to build up the courage to say something.

BE READY WITH INFORMATION ABOUT THE NEXT BOOK CLUB SELECTION before they leave!

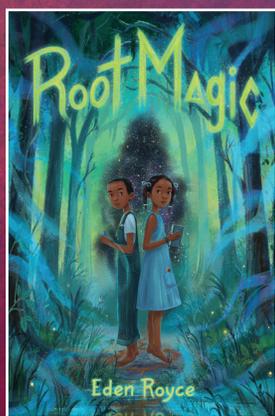
Tips provided by Cindy Minnich, a high school English teacher and certified school librarian in Pennsylvania.

More discussion-worthy titles for your book group



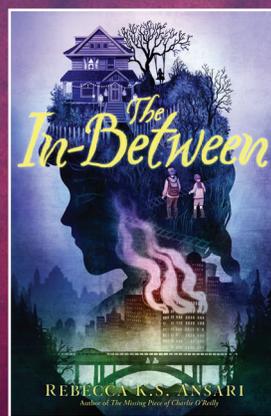
The Sea in Winter
Christine Day

★ “A heartening glimpse into the immense patience and love required to endure limitations, build strength, and repair damage.”
—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)



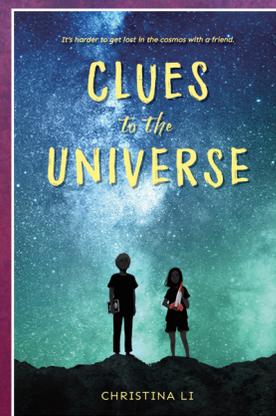
Root Magic
Eden Royce

★ “This richly detailed narrative offers elements of magical realism against a backdrop of social change, presenting a convincing family story and exploring community differences.”
—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)



The In-Between
Rebecca K.S. Ansari

★ “With a memorable twist and an awesome mystery, this title is too good to be missed.”
—*School Library Journal*
(starred review)



Clues to the Universe
Christina Li

“This sweet story tackles big subjects—bereavement, growing up in a mixed-race family, familial estrangement—with a light touch, grounding the quirky characters in warmth and humor.”
—*Booklist*