



QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION TOPICS

Background

Linda Ellerbee of Nick News produced an excellent special several years ago to help kids understand more about what happened on 9/11. It is straightforward, factual, and age-appropriate. Here are a couple of links, or search for “Linda Ellerbee Story of 9/11.”

<http://www.digitalpodcast.com/items/8312577>

<https://podfanatic.com/podcast/nick-news-with-linda-ellerbee/episode/what-happened-the-story-of-september-11-2001>

The 9/11 Museum has extensive educational resources. Just be sure to pre-screen the video clips; there are no gory images, but in some of the clips of the towers falling, on the interactive timeline, you can hear people swearing in the background.

<https://www.911memorial.org/teach-learn>

Finally, pull up a map of Manhattan and New Jersey. Help the students locate the WTC site in lower Manhattan. Then find Jersey City across the river. This will help orient them to the geography of the journeys in the story.

Heroism

- Do you think heroes will be an important part of this story? How do you know? (Hint: re-read the very first line of the book. Students can be reminded that the beginning of a book is important real estate, and authors use it carefully. So it’s worth paying extra close attention here. What do you think the author is trying to signal might be an important idea in the story?)
- In the first chapter, what does Alex think it means to be a hero?
- As you read, think about whether or not Alex is or isn’t a hero. What does it mean to be a hero if you’re a kid? Can a kid even be a hero?
- As you get farther into the book, think how Alex’s idea of a hero might be changing. At the end, he’s not flying a fighter jet or saving the world. But is he a hero? How? Cite examples.

Kindness

- Are there many examples of kindness – people doing something unusually generous or thoughtful – in the first five chapters (before the towers are hit)?

- What about after? Guide the students to watch for acts of kindness.
- Why are there so many more instances of kindness after tragedy strikes? Does this say something about one way people respond to difficult times?
- Why don't people act that way during ordinary times? Is there a lesson to take away from this?

Kindness vs. heroism

- One school I work with created a long paper wall chart that had “Acts of Kindness” marked on one end and “Acts of Heroism” on the other. The kids would write events from the book onto Post-Its and then stick them where they felt they belonged on the continuum between kindness and heroism.
- On the ends might be the pizza man giving a free lunch to Alex (100% kindness), and the firefighters racing into the World Trade Center (100% heroism).
- Things get interesting in the middle: Where do you put Alex rescuing Radar? What about Alex carrying Nunu home? Or Alex telling the muffin story to Nunu to protect her from the truth? What about The Man in the White Shirt helping carry an injured man to assistance? These aren't black-and-white issues, so having the kids defend their choices makes for some interesting discussions.

Responsibility/Maturity

- Is Alex mature or immature at the start? How do we know? Cite examples.
- Does he want to be considered mature and responsible? What's keeping him from his goal?
- As the story progresses, does he seem to be changing? How can you tell? In what way is he acting differently?
- Think about Alex at the end: is he the same guy he was at the start? What's different? Cite examples of him acting more mature and responsible.

Journeys

- Discuss the two kinds of journeys characters can take: physical and metaphorical. Their journey may take them to a new place. Or it may lead them to become a different person than they were at the start. Or both.
- Chart the characters' physical journeys:
 - Where does Alex's day take him?
 - How about the Man in the White Shirt?
 - How about Radar?
 - How about Mac?
- Then think about the characters' emotional journeys.
 - What is Alex's metaphorical journey? His physical journey is circular: it begins and ends in the same place (home). But when he returns home, is he the same boy who started the story?

- How about The Man in the White Shirt? (Spoiler: How does he feel about his son at the beginning? Does he view him differently by the end?)
- What about Mac? He takes no physical journey at all. He is in the same place for the entire story. But is he in the same emotional place at the end?
- What about Radar?
- One student even pointed out to me that Calvin (the bully's sidekick) has a character journey. Does the Calvin of Chapter 35 seem like the same boy we met in Chapter 4?
- Theme of Home: What do many of these journeys have in common? What is everyone's destination? Is the idea of "home" important in the book? Look for references to home. Think about what "home" means. How does Alex think about his home at the start? How about later? Think about the USA as your home. What has changed about our view of our home, and whether we take it for granted or treasure it?

Who is The Man in the White Shirt (TMITWS)?

- When you first meet him, who do you think he might be?
- After we encounter the old man, Mac, does it change who think TMITWS might be?
- Divide into two groups: those who think it's Alex's Dad, and those who think it's Bobby. Each side should cite evidence from the text to make their case. Compare your evidence: are both sides similar? Could it be either one?
- Why do you think the author did this?
- Author's note: when TMITWS arrives home and knocks on his own door, it should seem equally likely that he could be Alex's Dad or Bobby. That was intentional: it should almost feel like a coin-toss, because random chance (who worked on which floor; who'd gone out for coffee or was late for work that morning; who got trapped in a blocked stairway and who found an open escape route) was often the only determining factor in who came home that day, and who didn't. Some were fortunate to have a glorious reunion with family, and some were not. The stories of Alex and Mac reflect both realities.

Visual imagery and symbolism

- There are three independent plot threads in the book, focusing on Alex, Mac, and TMITWS. For a long time, they don't connect. How does the author use parallel visual imagery to make the plot threads feel connected?
- Look especially at Chapters 18, 19, and 20, which form the midpoint of the book. How are the chapters connected by symbol, time, and theme? [Hint: look at the last line of each chapter.]