

DISCUSSION GUIDE

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Themes: Love & Romance, Emotions & Feelings, Friendship, Creativity & Writing, Ethics/Right vs. Wrong

ABOUT THE BOOK

At an elite New England boarding school, eight students are selected for an exclusive storytelling workshop with the one and only Meredith Graffam—an enigmatic writer, director, and actress. For sixteen days, they will live in the isolated estate of the school's founder, surrounded by snowy woods and storm-tossed seas. Only one of the chosen will walk away with a life-changing opportunity to realize their creative dreams.

Everyone, including Graffam, has a compelling reason to be there—Effy, the orphan; Isaac, the legacy; Ness, the wallflower; Ramon, the outsider; and Arlo, whose unexpected arrival leaves Effy spiraling—but only the most ambitious will last the term. Graffam's unorthodox methods push the students past the breaking point, to reveal their darkest secrets, take unthinkable risks, and slowly start to turn on one another. But Graffam never expected they would turn on *her* . . .

From the number one *New York Times* bestselling author of *All the Bright Places* comes a psychological thriller about the monsters who walk among us—even in the glittering upper echelons of society—and the ways in which we seek redemption for the wrongs we've done.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jennifer Niven is the number one New York Times and internationally bestselling author of All the Bright Places, Holding Up the Universe, and Breathless. Her books have been translated in over seventy-five languages and have won literary awards around the world. An Emmy award-winning screenwriter, she cowrote the script for the All the Bright Places movie—currently streaming on Netflix and

starring Elle Fanning and Justice Smith. She is also the author of several narrative nonfiction titles and the Velva Jean historical fiction series. Jennifer divides her time between coastal Georgia and Los Angeles with her husband and literary cats.

PRE-READING QUESTIONS

- What is your definition of "monster"? What would make you label a person a monster? What examples do you know of monsters from history, current events, mythology, or fictional narratives like novels or movies?
- To what extent do you think novelists base their writing on their own lives and the lives of those around them? What ethical issues are related to drawing from other people's lives?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Describe Effy and her background. What happened to her parents? How does she feel about her father? What role does her grandmother play in her life? What are Effy's goals in life and in terms of writing? What are her strengths? What does she struggle with?
- How do Arlo and Effy know each other? Why do you think they are attracted to each other? What happened in their earlier relationship at school? What are their feelings about their shared past and its end? How does their relationship grow at The Moss? Why did the author choose to alternate the narrative between them?
- Discuss Arlo and his family. How has his parents' work affected him? How does he feel about his brother? Explain what happened to Jonah and why Arlo feels guilty. Why do you think he sometimes addresses his thoughts in the second person to Jonah? How does Arlo come across to other people? Why is he constantly talking and joking? What does he hope for from his Jan Term?
- Who are the other students at Jan Term? Briefly give the background of each and what they reveal about themselves including their fears. What are some of the students' secrets? Which secrets become important to the plot? Why do the four students leave early? What happens to Ramon? Why do you think Isaac and Ness end up staying longer?
- What are your first impressions of Meredith Graffam? What do you learn about her personal history and her success? Why are the students excited to study with her? How does your view of her change throughout the novel? Give examples of how she manipulates the students and sets them against each other. When, if at all, do you consider her behavior inappropriate? What do you think her goals are?

- How important is the setting to the plot and atmosphere? Describe The Moss and its history. What aspects of the house are important and add to the sense of mystery? Talk about the role of the sea, the cliffs, the forest, the weather, and the isolation. Explain Jan Term, what it offers, and why it takes place at The Moss. Talk about the Wild Hunt, including its history and its place in the story.
- The prologue opens with "The day before we killed Meredith Graffam." How does that beginning affect you as you start reading? How would the story have been different if you didn't realize Meredith would be killed? What purposes does the prologue serve? When does the narrative return to this point in time?
- Discuss Arlo's comment near the end of the prologue: "I was anxious for material, for a story of my own. And now I have one." What do you learn in the "Five Years Later" chapter about what Arlo did with his story? What do you find out in that chapter about the futures of Effy, Arlo, Isaac, and Ness? In what ways have they become like Meredith? How are they different from her?
- What are ways that the author builds suspense? For example, discuss the role of the Scrabble board and who Arlo thinks is leaving warnings. Give some examples of foreshadowing and of how tension is built. When do the students start suspecting that Meredith is manipulating them? When do they start being afraid of her?

- Talk about the final scene on the cliff that resolves the primary conflict of the story and the newspaper article that follows. How do the four students justify their fatal action against Meredith? What do you think about what they did? Why does Meredith at the end have "a smile that says she's won"?
- Review the "Immersive Storytelling" advice at the beginnings of Weeks One, Two, and Three. How does the advice relate to Meredith's own actions? How does it foreshadow her treatment of the students? Which pieces of advice are about life, and which are about writing? Talk about the three quotations that are included in those sections and how they tie into the story.
- In what ways does the title fit the novel? Who in the novel could be called a "monster"? By the end, would you label any of the characters a monster: Meredith? Effy's father? Any of the students? Relate the novel's epigraph from *Frankenstein* to the story and discuss references in the story to Mary Shelley and her novel.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

- Arlo, Effy, Isaac, and Ness find a book titled *Power Play: Directing for the Theater and Screen* in Meredith's bedroom. They read aloud some of the passages and Meredith's notations next to them. Relate the "laws" and notes to Meredith's actions and how those actions affected the students. Talk about the students' sense of betrayal while reading the book and at other times.
- Explore Jennifer Niven's website and the website of <u>Germ magazine</u>, an online magazine she started for young people in high school and beyond to "discuss all aspects and experiences of life." Read some of the short pieces and share what you found. Check out the online Q&A <u>interview</u> with Niven at *Paste Magazine*, and relate her comments to your reading of the novel.
- Compile some of the specific advice that Meredith gives the students about writing. How useful is it? Does she help the students become better writers? Discuss how the novel illustrates some of the advice, such as "The key to dramatic writing is conflict" and "A story is a series of events that build toward unalterable change." Talk about the Stephen King advice about writing: "Show up, every day."

Kathleen Odean, a longtime youth librarian, chaired the 2002 Newbery Award Committee.



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