

READ BETWEEN THE LINES

ABOUT THE BOOK

Thanks to a bully in gym class, unpopular Nate suffers a broken finger—the middle one, splinted to flip off the world. It won't be the last time that a middle finger is raised on this day. Dreamer Claire envisions herself sitting in an artsy café, filling a journal, but fate has other plans. One cheerleader dates a closeted basketball star; another questions just how, as a “big girl,” she fits in. A group of boys scam drivers for beer money without remorse—or so it seems. Over the course of a single day, these voices and others speak loud and clear about the complex dance that is life in a small town. They resonate in a gritty and unflinching portrayal of a day like any other, with ordinary traumas, heartbreak, and revenge. But on any given day, the line where presentation and perception meet is a tenuous one, so hard to discern. Unless, of course, one looks a little closer—and reads between the lines.


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Common Core Connections

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the Reading Literature standards for Key Ideas and Details, Craft and Structure, and Integration of Knowledge and Ideas (**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL**), as well as the Speaking and Listening standards for Comprehension and Collaboration and for Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas (**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL**). Questions can also be used as writing prompts for independent work.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. There are many reasons that people give—or get—the finger. Keep track of all the times a middle finger is raised in this novel. What prompts the gesture in each situation? When do you think it is justified? When do you think it isn't? Why?
2. As the school nurse tends his broken finger, Nate contemplates, “Sometimes I think she is the only one who cares. Who understands” (page 13). Why does he feel this way? Why is he mistaken? Who else understands and cares about him?
3. “Liar” is how Claire describes herself at the very beginning of her chapter (page 45). Do you agree? Who are the other liars in this novel?
4. All of the narrators are highly critical of themselves. Which of them do you think are being overly critical? Why are they so tough on themselves?
5. Why do you think the author decided to use ten narrators? What are the advantages of structuring a novel this way? What are the challenges it presents for the writer and the reader?
6. All but one chapter is written in the first person. Why do you think Ms. Lindsay's section is written in the third person?
7. There is an old saying that there are two sides to every story. But this novel presents ten perspectives on one single day. How do the narrators' stories build upon one another? Why do you need all the narrators to fully understand Irving High?
8. “I don't know the real thoughts of my closest friends,” Claire realizes (page 61). “I used to, when we were younger.” Is that also true of you? Why is it easy to be honest when you're a child and harder as you grow up?
9. “*There must be more to life,*” Jack thinks (page 123). Do you think other narrators feel the same way? Why?
10. Would you want to be a student at Irving High? How does it compare to your school? Would Ms. Lindsay be more hopeful if she taught at your school? Would Ms. Yung be less cynical?

11. At first glance, several of the narrators in this novel come across as unlikable. Who did you initially dislike the most? Does your opinion change over the course of the novel? Why or why not?
12. Mr. Weidenheff is already dead when *Read Between the Lines* begins, but he casts a long shadow. What is his role in this novel? What effect does he still have on Irving High?
13. What are the social and class divisions at Irving High? Which narrators experience these differences most sharply? Why?
14. What does Nate realize about himself when he becomes “Finger Boy”? What does Ms. Lindsay discover about herself at the same time?
15. “I am a human jungle gym,” Lacy thinks (page 244). “A stepladder.” Why is she sometimes humiliated by her position on the cheerleading squad? Why is she sometimes proud of it?
16. Imagine that five years have passed. Is Dewey still working at his “temporary” job at Little Cindy’s? Has Ben come out of the closet for good? Which characters have stayed in town? Which have left? Where have they gone?
17. “*Read between the lines, class,*” Ms. Lindsay thinks when she holds up three fingers (page 324). In your own words, what is she saying to her class? What is she saying to herself? Are you in the habit of reading between the lines? Why or why not?



ABOUT JO KNOWLES

Jo Knowles is the author of several acclaimed novels, including *Jumping Off Swings* and its companion, *Living with Jackie Chan*. A raised middle finger from an overheated driver many years ago got her thinking about the gesture and its unsettling power. She lives with her family in Vermont.



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