

Discussion Questions & Social Engagement for the Young Adult Novel:



NOTHING BUT BLUE

By Lisa Jahn-Clough

Published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

ISBN: 978-0-618-95961-7

About the Book:

A teenage girl has lived through a tragedy, but she has repressed the details. She finds herself homeless with nothing but the clothes on her back and flip-flops on her feet. She cannot even remember her name, so she calls herself Blue. She is compelled to walk. Step by step she makes her way through the depression and loneliness of “now” and bits of memories from “before.” Along the way she meets a unique dog and names him Shadow. Blue and Shadow journey to the sea and the only home she remembers. Along the way, her path crosses with the paths of many others. The people she meets are often good and helpful, but sometimes dangerous. They each help her learn more about the human race and herself. They also help reveal pieces of her past. When she finally returns “home,” Blue clearly remembers the tragic event that she has repressed. She must decide if her long journey has prepared her to live the rest of her life as a survivor.

Questions for Discussion:

Before you read:

1. Look at the cover image of NOTHING BUT BLUE. What do you predict this book will be about? What mood is suggested by the fog and blue tones? Why do you think the art director chose to turn the photo on its side?
2. An epigraph is a phrase of quotation set at the beginning of a book to suggest a theme. Jahn-Clough chose a quote from Walt Whitman. “Know the universe as a road, as many roads, as roads for traveling souls.” What is the significance of Whitman adding – “as many roads” – to the sentence?

First ½ of the book:

3. Why can the narrator remember some things and not others?
4. The author has split the chapters into “Now” and “Before.” Can you identify a turning point in your own life that splits your life in this same way? How did you change because of a momentous happening?
5. What kind of food does Blue dream of when she gets hungry? What does this reveal about her character?
6. What is Blue’s first reaction to the dog in her cardboard shelter?

Questions for Discussion (cont.):

7. The man at the Firefly restaurant asks Blue if she's a runaway. How do you define a runaway and does Blue match your definition?
8. What skills and characteristics does a "survivor" have? Does Blue have those skills and characteristics? What are your predictions for her survival?
9. There are many references to fog and mist throughout the book. How is Blue in a perpetual fog? What could the fog symbolize?
10. "I'm starting to think this is not your ordinary mangy mutt," Blue says of the stray dog. What clues have been given as evidence of this?
11. What different meanings can you come up with for the words blue and shadow? Which meanings fit the characters best?
12. In one of the "Before" scenes, Blue and Jake kiss in his car. Even though things are moving quickly, she is still physical with him. Why? What does she gain from this interaction? What does she lose?
13. When Shadow protects Blue, what does it mean to their relationship? Does protection equal love? Is there a control factor when one person protects another? How is it different because Shadow is a dog?
14. Have you ever had a solo overnight camping experience? What scared you and what did you learn about yourself? If you haven't been camping alone, would you want to? Why or why not?
15. "You have the power to end your life– you have the power to live," Blue hears at the pond. What would you want to tell Blue about teen suicide?
16. Blue's parents say that they are moving so they can give Blue more things. What is important to Blue's parents? What is important to Blue? How are their wants different and similar?
17. Do you think Shadow is a magic dog? Why or why not? Discuss the progression of the companionship between Blue and Shadow.
18. Blue runs away from most of the people she meets along her journey. Why do you think she lets Snake into her world?
19. How are Snake and Jake different? Do they have any similarities? What did they each see in Blue? What does she like about each of them?
20. How does Blue understand physical relationships with guys?

Questions for Discussion (cont.):

Second ½ of the book:

21. Blue determines that she is walking to the sea and to the only house that felt like home. What makes a home? Think about, and describe your own home. Is it similar or different than Blue's home? What do you think Blue is hoping to find when she gets home?
22. Why is Blue's room important to her? How does it reflect who she is? What would be in a room that reflected you?
23. Blue and Snake consider the consequences then decide to free Shadow from the shelter. How has Blue's relationship with Shadow changed during the course of their journey? What would you have done in the same situation? Was it the right thing to do? Why or why not?
24. "Everyone here has a past they want to forget," Snake tells Blue as they enter Hobo Town. How does that apply to you? Has Blue chosen to forget her past or can she really not remember?
25. Hobo Town has its own rules. If you were to make a town from scratch, what would you change from the world as it is? What would you keep?
26. Discuss the rail bulls. Why should the rail bulls destroy Hobo Town? Why should the "hobos" be allowed to stay there?
27. Blue takes a risk to warn Hobo Town about the rail bulls. Would the Blue in the "Before" chapters have done the same thing? How has her journey changed her?
28. "I remembered him all wrong," Blue says about Jake. In your experience, how much of memory is truth and how much is perception? How have pictures, objects, and stories from others crafted your memories?
29. What feelings does Blue wrestle with as the survivor of her family?
30. Discuss the ending of the book. Was it hopeful? Was it satisfying? Would you change the ending? If so, how?

Skype with the Author:

After answering all those questions, do you have questions of your own? Author Lisa Jahn-Clough will do a 15-20 minutes Skype with your class or book club for free. See the final page for details.

Social Engagement:

Take Action- Helping Blue:

- If you encountered Blue on her journey, what would be your first impression of her?
- Would Blue be able to tell you why she was walking, why she was alone? Are the reasons why people are homeless or suffering knowable?
- Some of the things Blue feels and experiences may feel familiar or may be quite different from the life you have led. Do you feel like you would like to help teens like Blue who are suffering from homelessness, hunger, depression, or in danger of suicide?



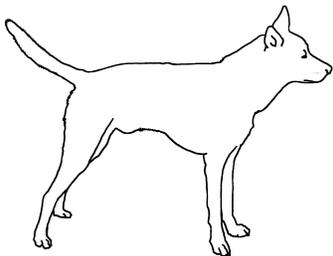
You and your friends may want to look at DoSomething.org, the country's largest not-for-profit for young people and social change. They spearhead national campaigns so 13- to 25-year-olds can make an impact - without ever needing money, an adult, or a car. They have 1,666,208 members (and counting) who "kick ass on causes they care about." They have ideas on how you can help combat Hunger,

Homelessness, Depression, Suicide, and tons of other issues.

Take Action- Helping Shadow:

[NAIA: Shelter Project](#) (National Animal Interest Alliance) is an organization dedicated to reducing the number of adoptable pets that are euthanized in shelters. Their volunteers collect and track shelter data and support spay/neuter clinics, dog training, the formation of rescue groups and other such advancements to create a better world for dogs and cats in the United States.

The [ASPCA](#) (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) works to improve the lives of animals. Teens who are part of the ASPCA Advocacy Brigade receive legislative email alerts and are informed about animal related legislation.



[The Human Society of the United States](#) has many resources for students and kids. Meaningful action projects include writing letters to the editor, making videos, and mentoring younger students.

About the Author:

Lisa Jahn-Clough has been in the field of children's books since 1994 as an author, illustrator, and teacher. She has published a dozen picture books to date and the young adult novels, *COUNTRY GIRL*, *CITY GIRL*, *ME*, *PENELOPE*, and *NOTHING BUT BLUE*.

NOTHING BUT BLUE is a culmination of several of her long-term interests: dogs, train hopping, alternative lifestyles, distance walking, and memory, but mainly she wanted to write about surviving tragedy and finding home.

Lisa was born on a farm to an artist mother and a zoologist father and grew up on the coast of Maine. She earned a BA from Hampshire College and an MFA in creative writing from Emerson College. She has taught at Emerson College, Vermont College of Fine Arts, Hamline University, and the Maine College of Art. She is now a professor at Rowan University. Lisa also speaks to elementary, middle and high school students as a visiting author. She lives with her husband and their two dogs in a little, yellow house in Portland, Maine in the summer and across from a cornfield in southern New Jersey in the winter. Visit her website at www.lisajahnclough.com



Skype with the Author:

After answering all those questions, do you have questions of your own? Author Lisa Jahn-Clough will do a 15-20 minutes Skype with your class or book club for free*. To book her for a free session or for a longer paid author visit or writing workshop, visit www.lisajahnclough.com.



*Free Skype sessions depend on Lisa's availability and will be in place through May 2014.

Praise for *NOTHING BUT BLUE*:

"With clipped prose of intimate detail and keen insight, Jahn-Clough crafts an authentically adolescent first-person narrative. . . .With tight pacing, motley characters, and touches of the spiritual, this is a furious, illuminating adventure."

—*Booklist*

"Those interested in the psychological landscape will appreciate the moments of kindness from strangers, the sympathetic portraits of people who fit best in the margins, and the overall optimistic vision of human nature."

—*Horn Book*