

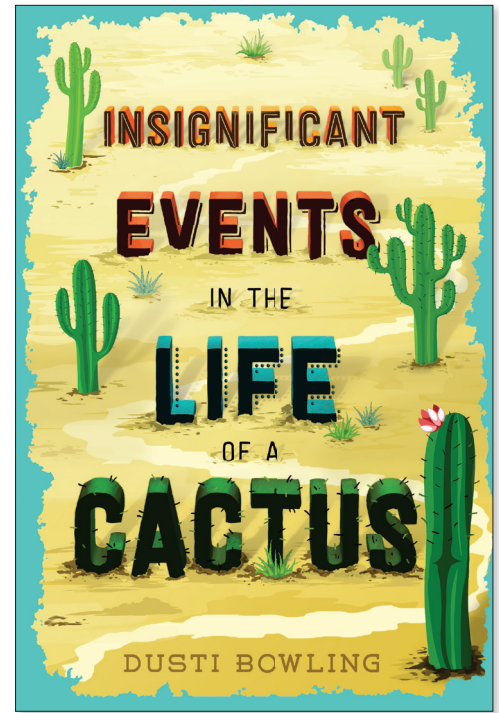
INSIGNIFICANT EVENTS IN THE LIFE OF A CACTUS

This discussion guide is designed to help parents, teachers, librarians, and booksellers explore the story's ideas, themes, and meaning with middle-grade readers.

THEMES FOR DISCUSSION: ACCEPTING DIFFERENCES, FRIENDSHIP, AND OVERCOMING YOUR FEARS

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you think your life would be different if you didn't have arms? Find some examples of the way Aven solves problems that arise from not having arms. What kind of problems would you face in your life if you didn't have arms? How would you solve them?
2. Think about the title of the book. Why is it called this? What does Aven mean when she says her life is an insignificant event in the life of a cactus?
3. This book is told in first person, from Aven's point-of-view. How do you think it would change if it were told in third person? Do you notice any differences between the way Aven talks to the reader and the way she writes her blog posts?
4. When Aven first meets Connor, and he points out that she doesn't have arms, she says, "Oh my gosh! I knew I was forgetting something today." How does she use her sense of humor to her advantage? Can you find other examples in the story where Aven makes light of not having arms?
5. In chapter 7, a girl at school asks Aven if her disability is contagious. Why does the girl ask this? Why does it make Aven feel bad?
6. Why does Zion eat on the sidewalk behind the office by himself? Do you know someone who spends a lot of time alone at school? What might be some ways to include him/her in your activities?
7. Compare and contrast Aven and Connor. What traits do they share? What traits make them different? Do you think Connor is as comfortable having Tourette's as Aven is not having arms? Find specific examples in the text to support your answer.
8. Why do Aven and Connor fight in chapter 29? Do you think they could have communicated their feelings to each other in a better way? How do you react when a friend hurts your feelings?
9. What happens in chapter 34 that makes Aven feel like dancing? How might the whole story have been different if Jessica had treated Aven like this on her first day of school?
10. Think about the setting the author has chosen, Stagecoach Pass. How does it affect the way you read the story?



LET'S DISCUSS . . .

STERLING
CHILDREN'S
BOOKS

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EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Have readers attempt to do simple tasks without the use of their arms—writing their names, eating a snack, opening a door. Then discuss as a group. How do they think their lives would change if they had to do things like that all the time?
2. Ask readers to look up the word “empathy.” Discuss what it means as a group, then ask them to try to come up with examples of a time when they felt empathy. Together, brainstorm ways readers can be more empathetic in their daily lives.
3. Have readers create a visitor’s brochure for Stagecoach Pass. Include a map of the park. Ask them to add some of their own ideas for different booths that the park could add to attract customers.
4. Aven, Connor, and Zion all face bullying in some sense in the story. Lead a discussion about bullying, asking readers to share their own experiences, and what they feel makes them different. Have them think back on times that they may have treated other kids unfairly, and how they can stand up for kids who are being bullied and include them in their activities.
5. Aven calls her blog “The Unarmed Middle Schooler’s Guide to Survival.” Have readers come up with names for their own blogs. What would they write about? Ask them to create a couple of sample posts, either by hand or on the computer.

