

TEEN BOOK CLUB

December 2016 Selection

***All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven**

Theodore Finch is fascinated by death. Every day he thinks of ways he might kill himself, but every day he also searches for-and manages to find- something to keep him here, and alive, and awake. Violet Markey lives for the future, counting the days until graduation when she can escape her small Indiana town and her aching grief in the wake of her sister's recent death. When Finch and Violet meet on the ledge of the bell tower at school-six stories above the ground-it's unclear who saves whom. Soon it's only with Violet that Finch can be himself. And it's only with Finch that Violet can forget to count away the days and start living them.

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Discussion Questions:

1. Finch quotes the Italian poet Cesare Pavese: "Love is truly the great manifesto; the urge to be, to count for something, and, if death must come, to die valiantly, with acclamation-in short, to remain a memory" (page 56). When Finch claims to be in search of the Great Manifesto, what do you think he is looking for? Over the course of the novel, does Finch come to find his Great Manifesto? If so, what form do you think it takes? What quotations or passages from the novel support your ideas?
2. As the text alternates between the perspectives of Finch and Violet, each of them is counting the days go by, but in different ways. Why might Niven, as the author, choose to switch back and forth between Finch's and Violet's points of view? What do their respective countdowns reveal about each of the characters, and the relationship between them, as the novel progresses? How might this story be different if it was told from only one of their perspectives?

3. Finch's encyclopedic knowledge of the modalities of suicide, as well as his ongoing personal journal about methods he has considered and rejected, are frequently interspersed throughout his narrative (see pages 36, 74, and 202, for example). What additional insights do these interludes provide about Finch? How does Finch's fascination with suicide jibe with his desperation to stay awake? (page 116)
4. Finch observes, "People either see me or they don't. I wonder what it's like to walk down the street, safe and easy in your skin, and just blend right in. No one turning away, no one staring, no one waiting and expecting, wondering what stupid, crazy thing you'll do next" (page 132). What does it mean to see someone the way Finch describes? Who are the people in Finch's life who truly see him? Who are the people who truly see Violet, and who are the people who don't? Are there people in your school or community who sometimes go unnoticed or unseen? What are some of the reasons why you might not see them, or pretend not to see their problems?
5. Consider the book's title, a reference to Dr. Seuss's *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*, which Finch and Violet read aloud together (pages 153–154). How does Niven's use of Dr. Seuss's children's book advance the themes of the novel? What is the significance of the novel's title? Where, or what, are the "bright places" for Finch and Violet, and how do they help each other find them? How would you describe your own bright places?
6. When Violet asks Finch, "Why did you do that? Lie to my parents?" he responds, "Because it's not a lie if it's how you feel" (page 195). Do you think Finch is lying or putting on an act when he meets Violet's parents? What does he mean when he says, "Sometimes . . . things feel true to us even if they're not" (page 195)? As the reader, do you trust that Finch is a reliable narrator? How and why do you think Finch chooses when to lie and when to be truthful? Are there times when you have felt something to be true, even when it wasn't?

7. Both Finch and Violet experiment with changes to their physical appearances; while Finch tries on personas like “Nerd Finch” or “British Finch,” Violet cuts her hair and wears her sister’s glasses. How do these outward changes reflect the inner journey of each character? Why do you think that Finch and Violet make the decisions they do about how they present themselves to the world? What are some of the ways that you use your own outward appearance to express your inner feelings?
8. While Finch and Violet have much in common, their home lives are very different. Consider each of their relationships with their parents and with their siblings. In what ways are Finch’s and Violet’s family relationships similar? In what ways are they different? How do these differences affect Finch and Violet, and how do they influence the course of the novel?
9. Throughout the whole novel, Violet struggles with guilt, first for surviving the accident that killed her sister, and later for not preventing Finch’s suicide. She tells Mr. Embry, “I know I could have done more. I should have seen what was going on” (page 347). Could Finch’s death have been prevented somehow? Why does Violet feel responsible? Who are some of the people who might have seen what was going on, and how might they have intervened? Why did no one take action to help Finch until it was too late?
10. Finch and Violet discover for themselves the words of Virginia Woolf in *The Waves*: “I feel a thousand capacities spring up in me. I am arch, gay, languid, melancholy by turns. I am rooted, but I flow. All gold, flowing” (page 76). These same words appear throughout the text in various forms, until they bring the novel to conclusion when Violet describes herself as “No longer rooted, but gold, flowing” (page 378). What are the different figurative and connotative meanings of the words in the Woolf quotation? Why do you think Finch and Violet are drawn to Woolf’s words, and this quote in particular? How does Niven use Woolf’s original text to develop her own theme and characters? What does Violet mean when she describes herself at the end of the book as “No longer rooted, but gold, flowing” (page 378)?

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