

a DISCUSSION GUIDE to

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *CRANK*

ELLEN HOPKINS

CLOSER to  
NOWHERE



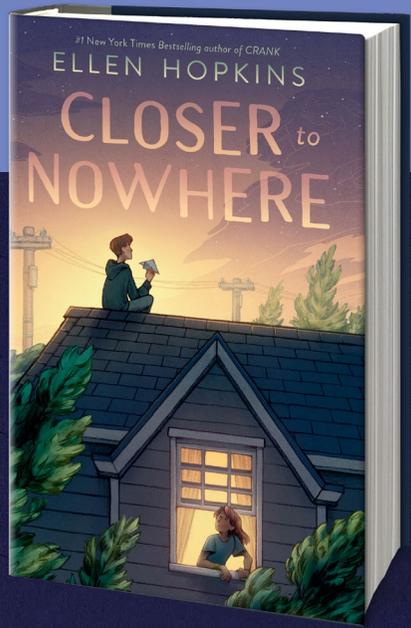
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# About THE BOOK

#1 *New York Times*  
bestselling author

**ELLEN HOPKINS's**  
poignant middle-grade novel  
in verse about coming to terms  
with indelible truths of family  
and belonging.



For the most part, Hannah's life is just how she wants it. She has two supportive parents, she's popular at school, and she's been killing it at gymnastics. But when her cousin Cal moves in with her family, everything changes. Cal tells half-truths and tall tales, pranks Hannah constantly, and seems to be the reason her parents are fighting more and more. Nothing is how it used to be. She knows that Cal went through a lot after his mom died and she is trying to be patient, but most days Hannah just wishes Cal never moved in.

For his part, Cal is trying his hardest to fit in, but not everyone is as appreciative of his unique sense of humor and storytelling gifts as he is. Humor and stories might be his defense mechanism, but if Cal doesn't let his walls down soon, he might push away the very people who are trying their best to love him.

Told in verse from the alternating perspectives of Hannah and Cal, this is a story of two cousins who are more alike than they realize and the family they both want to save.

This guide was created by Kit Ballenger, a youth services librarian and former child advocacy attorney in the Washington, DC, area. A literary consultant and avid booktalker, Kit works with families and for clients including NPR/Tinkercast, SiriusXM Radio, and National PTA. Visit her at [HelpYourShelf.com](http://HelpYourShelf.com).

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This story alternates perspectives between twelve-year-old cousins Calvin Pace and Hannah Lincoln. Why might an author choose to present a story in two voices? As a reader, what are the challenges and benefits of a dual-perspective story?
2. How do the two chapter heading styles—Cal’s Fact or Fiction statements and Hannah’s Definitions—reflect the sixth graders’ personalities?
3. Cal and Hannah were each raised as an only child until fifteen months before the story begins. What do you think it would be like to suddenly have a sibling your own age? How might the cousins’ current living arrangement be easier or more complicated by their shared lineage and family history?
4. A school project leads Hannah to consider what she has in common with Cal as well as some of their significant differences. Cal and Hannah share copper-colored hair and their Northern Italian heritage, for example, but their nuclear families had different socioeconomic statuses and stability (197). How might the differences in their upbringing account for Cal and Hannah responding differently in the same situation?
5. Throughout the novel, Cal describes his heightened emotional states using various figures of speech. At various points he explains anxiety as “A low hum like a faraway beehive” (118), and fear as “A noise like a million crickets . . . inside my brain” (367). Choose an emotional state of your own that you’re comfortable discussing and describe that feeling with your own figure of speech, such as a simile or metaphor.
6. Hannah refers to Cal as “a fake kid” repeatedly, at the start of the book, the middle, and again at the end (21, 263, 403). Explore Hannah’s use of that descriptor and her social-emotional development between each use.
7. Cal uses hyperbole, embellishment, and exaggeration to deflect and defuse uncomfortable situations. Choose your favorite tall tale of Cal’s—perhaps his piratical ancestors (214) or the police encounter with Officer Ash (343)—and explore how Cal’s storytelling serves as a defense mechanism.
8. Complicated family dynamics extend across generations in this novel. Discuss the emotional tensions between Grandma Campbell and Taryn, Grandma Campbell and Cal, and Grandma Campbell and Cal as a surrogate for his deceased mother, Caryn.
9. Cal and Hannah are at odds for much of the book. Identify a moment when the two are less contentious and more collaborative, and reflect on how teamwork changes their relationship. Consider, for example, their confrontation of their grandmother on Thanksgiving (362) or their sheltering in the library during the school lockdown (381).
10. Their classmate Brylee shows Cal kindness when most other peers do not, including seeking Cal’s help at her birthday party (162) and comforting Cal when they meet at the shelter (311). Why do you think Brylee’s compassion toward Cal makes Hannah jealous?

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*continued*

11. Belonging is a major theme of the book, but Cal and Hannah's definitions of the term differ widely. Explore what belonging means to each of the cousins, and why their priorities might differ.
12. Cal is an avid reader and can often be found with his nose in a book. Do you enjoy reading? What types of books offer you an escape? If you don't especially enjoy reading, what is some way, perhaps through music or a sport, that you find comfort or distraction?
13. Tensions between Cal and his uncle Bruce run high. At one point Cal reflects on Uncle Bruce's displeasure and expresses a desire to be "understood encouraged wanted" (84) by him. When Uncle Bruce says he doesn't want to get rid of Cal, why can't Cal believe him (120)?
14. Discuss the structure of *Closer to Nowhere* as a novel. Consider the language, rhythm, and imagery of the verse; the book's short chapters; Cal and Hannah's alternating voices; and the author's decision to gradually reveal backstory.

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. In her Author's Note, Ellen Hopkins explains that this book was inspired by her family's own struggles with addiction and, in particular, by the lived experiences of one of her grandsons. Discuss potential strengths and challenges of an author fictionalizing her personal experience and your reaction upon learning that much of Cal's behavior was rooted in truth. Consider, too, Hopkins's hope that "this book will plant seeds of empathy for kids with behavioral problems they can't always control" (408). How might reading this book impact how you respond to emotional outbursts by peers in the future?
2. Invite students to assume the voice of either Cal or Hannah and write a few paragraphs of free verse in the style of their chosen character. Be sure students include an appropriate header, either *FACT OR FICTION:* or *Definition of*, that connects to their piece.
3. Research [Maslow's Hierarchy](#) and consider those five basic needs for happiness in the context of Cal's past. Cal notes that, despite the "simple pleasures" of the Lincoln home, his cousin's family is still "miserable" (52). Why might Cal and Hannah's ideas of happiness differ?
4. *Closer to Nowhere* does not shy away from very real, weighty, and traumatic issues, including addiction, incarceration, domestic violence, and family toxicity. Invite a school counselor, social worker, or local therapist who works with family trauma and PTSD to join you in a facilitated discussion of the social-emotional and mental health implications of the book's many issues.

# PRAISE for CLOSER to NOWHERE

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“COMPASSIONATE  
and COMPELLING.”

—KIRKUS REVIEWS

“POWERFUL . . .  
*will stay with me for a long time.*”

—PERNILLE RIPP, educator and founder of  
the Global Read Aloud

## About ELLEN HOPKINS

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PHOTO CREDIT: SONYA SONES

**ELLEN HOPKINS** is a former journalist and the award-winning author of twenty nonfiction books for young readers, fourteen bestselling young-adult novels, and four novels for adult readers. With this book, she is honored to enter the realm of middle-grade fiction. Ellen lives with her extended family, one brilliant German shepherd, a retired rescue cat, and two ponds (not pounds) of koi in the eastern shadow of the Northern Nevada Sierra.

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