

AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO

The Night Fox

by Ashley Wilda



**"AN EVOCATIVE, IMAGINATIVE STORY ABOUT OUR
EMOTIONAL LANDSCAPES AND THE QUEST FOR
MENTAL HEALTH AND INDEPENDENCE"**

-KIRKUS

THE STORY



When seventeen-year-old Eli arrives at Raeth, a remote mountain retreat for teens with mental health issues, her mind is made up—she is not interested in participating, and she doesn’t need to “heal.” Still reeling from a breakup that left both her heart and faith shattered, she is determined to fake being “fine” so that the program’s warden will clear her to return home.

But the retreat itself has other ideas. The valley’s magical surroundings transform each time she ventures out, playing with her mind and dredging up her grief-laden memories. Despite the warning signs, Eli explores more of the area than she had ever planned, even venturing into the dangerous night realm.

This spellbinding novel mixes prose and poetry into an exquisite and evocative portrait of love, grief, depression, and the slow path toward healing.

DEAR EDUCATOR

You are magic.

There's always been a disconnect between adults and teens when it comes to mental health. But it's more important than ever to bridge that gap as librarians, educators, and authors.

We are experiencing a mental health epidemic in the US, especially among teens. Each kid in your classroom or library carries a story with them - a story they believe about themselves. A mix of experiences, truths, and lies that *feel* very true about their identity and struggles.

Through books, we get to come alongside their narratives and help them feel seen. Stories about mental health are more important than ever, providing a way for kids to talk about what's really going on.

You get to be a bridge of hope, from a teen's current reality to what could be if they only dare to believe it could be theirs.

So believe kids.

Listen to their stories. Tell your own. And use this book as a conduit for speaking those stories aloud. For hope. For healing. For magic.

I believe in you.

- Ashley Wilda



COMPLEMENTING TEXTS

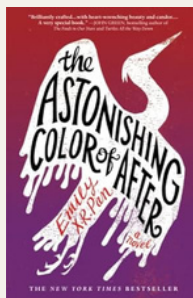
Pairings for *The Night Fox*

When recommending books for young people, it's imperative to uplift diverse voices and ensure all kids can see themselves in the stories they read. The below books can be paired with *The Night Fox* and include themes of mental health, grief, hope, and healing.

Young Adult



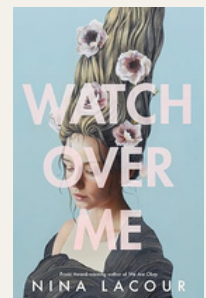
We Are All So Good at Smiling, a novel in verse about clinical depression.



The Astonishing Color of After, a novel about coping with the suicide of a family member.



Edge of Anything, a dual POV novel about two teens struggling with different mental & physical health conditions.



Watch Over Me, a novel about loneliness and processing trauma.



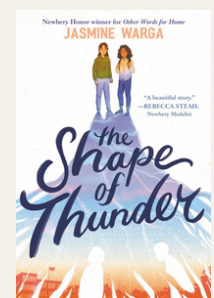
Middle Grade



The Thing About Jellyfish, a novel about the death of a best friend.



Maybe a Fox, a novel about losing a sister.



The Shape of Thunder, a novel about friendship loss and processing school shooting trauma.

Before Discussion: Safe Spaces

HOW TO CULTIVATE AN
EMOTIONALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENT
FOR CONNECTION

Trigger Warnings

This book includes heavy topics such as depression, panic attacks, suicidal thoughts, complex PTSD symptoms, and unprocessed religious trauma.

These topics may bring up unexpected emotions or memories for your students.



Trauma-Sensitive Spaces

A few things you can do to ensure your classroom or library is a trauma-sensitive space:

- Provide Creative & Multi-Sensory Learning
- Promote Equity
- Create a Emotionally Safe Learning Environment
- Form Trusting Relationships

And of course, remember to recommend other professional resources, such as therapy and medication management.

Pre-Reading Freewrite

BEFORE READING *THE NIGHT FOX*

- When you hear the words “mental health,” what comes to mind?
- What does the inside of your mind and body feel like most of the time? Write a description or draw a picture.
- Do you ever spend time outside in nature? If so, how does it make you feel?
- Think about the word “grief.” What does that make you think of?
- Have you ever experienced the loss of a relationship or something else very important to you? What did that feel like? How do you feel about that loss now?



- Think about the word “healing.” What does that bring to mind?
- Have you ever experienced emotional healing from something really difficult that happened to you? What was that like?
- Do you have any struggles or hurts that you wish would be healed in the future?
- Think about the word “hope.” What does hope feel like to you?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS BY THEME

For The Night Fox

Part I - Setting and Symbolism

- Sometimes settings can act as characters in a story. Is Raeth a character in this novel? If so, how would you describe that character?
- Eli meets four different versions of herself through Raeth's magic. What is each one trying to tell her?
- Eli has a fox carving and also encounters a real fox in Raeth's nighttime world. What does the fox symbolize?
- Toward the end of the novel when Eli is exploring Raeth at night, she hears a mysterious voice. Who or what do you think that voice belongs to? What does it mean?
- What is the story that Eli is telling herself about who she is and what has happened to her? Is it true, or only partly true? Does it change over the course of the novel?

Part II - Poetry and Magic

- Eli's memories are written in poetry. Why do you think the author chose that medium? Is poetry a good way to convey emotion and memory? Why or why not?
- This book combines the real world with magic - often called magical realism. Why do you think the author chose that genre to tell this particular story? Do you think it works? Why or why not?



Part III - Relationships

- The poetry chapters describe Eli's relationship with her ex-boyfriend. What do you think of their relationship? Was it healthy? Was it toxic? Why or why not?
- Eli's Mom drops her off at Raeth, and Eli discovers that she was once a resident herself. How would you describe her relationship with her mom at the beginning of the story? How do you think their relationship will be changed by what Eli learns at Raeth?
- Eli and Gale have a complex friendship. How does it change over the course of the book? What do you think will happen to their relationship after the book ends?
- Throughout Eli's adventures, she meets three other Raeth residents. What impact does each person have on Eli and how she thinks about herself? How does she impact them?

Part IV - Grief and Hope

- For Eli, hope is a complicated thing. On one hand, it's nice to believe she could be with her ex again. On the other hand, holding onto that hope is destroying her. Have you ever thought about hope as a thing with two sides? Is it better to hold on or let go?
- As Eli grieves the loss of her relationship, she struggles with feeling hopeless. But at the end of the novel, her hope shifts to something new. What does she realize? How does that new hope change her?
- Throughout the story, Eli feels comforted by exploring nature. How can nature help us when we are grappling with difficult feelings or situations?



Part V - Faith

- Eli has a complicated relationship with her faith. What are positive aspects of Eli's faith? What are negative elements?
- Eli breaks up with her boyfriend because of religious differences. Do you agree with her decision? Do you think she had a choice?
- Eli's faith shifts throughout the story. How does it change? Do you think it will continue to change after the end of the story?

Part VI - Mental Health

- In the book, Eli struggles with depression, panic attacks, and flashbacks. Do you think the way these experiences are portrayed is realistic?
- Often, people find it hard to talk about mental health struggles. When Eli finally lets people in, she starts to get better. Why do you think that makes such a difference for her?
- Raeth is a kind of magical therapy for Eli. In our world, we have other resources, like real therapy and medication. Do you think Eli will use those resources after she leaves Raeth? Should she?
- More people are being open about mental health, which is amazing, but in the past, there has been some stigma around mental illness. Why is it important to bring conversations about mental health out into the open? What can you do to make a difference?



Writing Exercises

- Consider the happiest or saddest moment of your life. Write a poem about it, using all your senses. Try adding a symbol, like the fox in Eli's story.
- Eli experiences hope as a double-edged thing - both life-giving and potentially harmful. What are your experiences with hope? Write a personal essay.
- Magic can be used as a conduit to write about difficult topics. Write a short story using magical realism to help convey a tricky theme.



Research Topics

- Compare the contemporary magical realism genre with its original Latin-American roots (e.g., Alejo Carpentier & Gabriel García Márquez).
- Research the mental health epidemic. Why is it happening? What can we do about it?
- Explore the science that supports the physical and mental health benefits of connecting with nature.
- Consider both the potential positive and negative role spirituality can play in the lives of both individuals and communities.



PRAISE FOR *THE NIGHT FOX*

“(A) great fit for younger and older teens looking for a comforting read with high emotional stakes and a gratifying bit of magic.”

– The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books

“The Night Fox will grip your heart like a creeping vine. A stunning debut threaded with strands of luminous poetry and love of the natural world, in all of its griefs and joys.”

– Jeff Zentner, author of *The Serpent King*

“Luminous prose and poetry, a story of pain, discovery, and healing. Raeth hypnotizes us as we travel with Eli through time and space...This powerful journey will stir your imagination and leave an indelible mark.”

– An Na, author of *The Place Between Breaths*



THE AUTHOR

Ashley Wilda is a queer, disabled, neurodivergent, Lebanese-American writer living in eastern Virginia. They hold an MFA in Creative Writing for Children and Young Adults from the Vermont College of Fine Arts. In addition to writing, they love rock climbing, exploring the mountains, creating art, and adventuring with their husband, Ethan, and rescue pup, Phoenix. Find Ash on Instagram (@ashleywilda_) or at www.ashleywilda.com.

