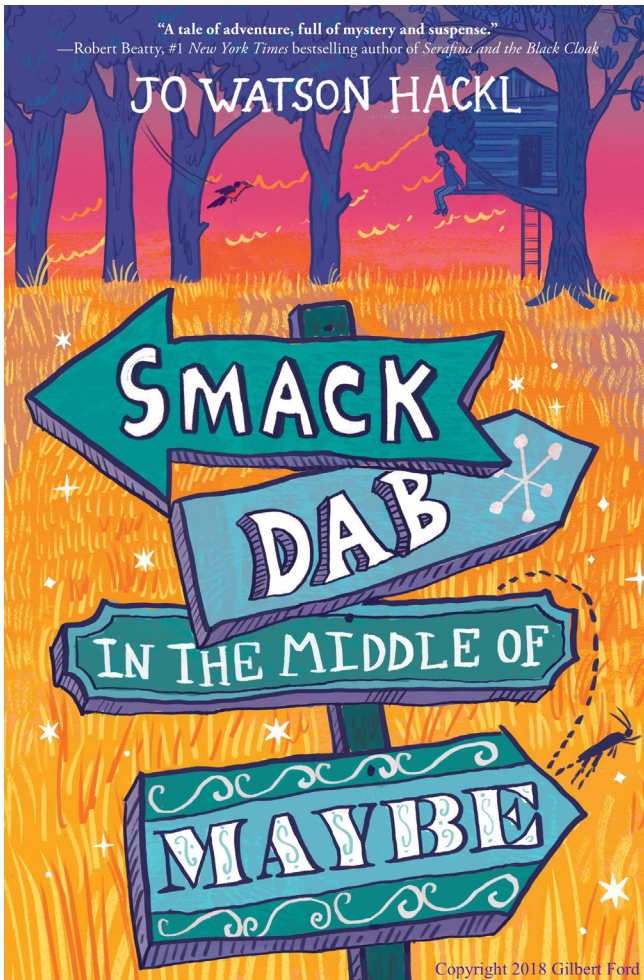


AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO

SMACK DAB IN THE MIDDLE OF MAYBE

BY JO WATSON HACKL



**A SUMMER 2018
KIDS' INDIE
NEXT PICK**

"Cricket is an intriguing and complex protagonist, and the plot, full of adventure, treasure hunts, and mystery, will keep young readers hooked."

—*School Library Journal*

"Lyrical and endearing, this debut is a genuine adventure tale, poignant and as fresh as a spring garden."

—*Kirkus*, starred review

The activities in this guide align with Common Core state standards and fit into the curriculum for grades 4-5; Additional lesson plans available upon request for grades 3-9.

Dear Educator,

Smack Dab in the Middle of Maybe is Jo Hackl's debut novel and a project 10 years in the making.

During the years she worked on this book, Jo honed her writing craft, learned how to survive in the woods and forage for food, and studied art and poetry. All that knowledge was poured into this beautiful story of resilience, perseverance, and discovery. In addition to those listed below, there are many subjects to which **Smack Dab in the Middle of Maybe** can be applied, including **literary criticism, critical thinking, social studies, science, nature**, and the **environment**—but we're sure that when you read it, you'll find even more! On top of that, you'll get to enjoy spending time with Cricket, a character author Augusta Scattergood calls, "my new hero, brave and funny and full of heart."

We hope you'll take a moment to explore this information, which includes a discussion guide written by former chair of the American Library Association's Intellectual Freedom Committee Pat Scales, 20 questions to kick off a discussion of the book in the classroom or book club, and bookmarks you can use as writing tools. If you would like to learn more about Jo and find fun facts behind the book as well as some additional resources, please visit www.johackl.com.

Please feel free to copy the included information for students, colleagues or classroom use.

Discussion guide covers:

Language
Reading
Vocabulary
Writing
and more

Optional interdisciplinary subjects:

Lesson plans for grades 3-9 available upon request in the following additional areas:

Art
Astronomy
Ecology
History
Outdoor survival skills
Poetry
Mental health



All her life, Cricket's mama has told her stories about a secret room painted by a mysterious artist. Now Mama's run off, and Cricket thinks the room might be the answer to getting her to come back. If it exists. And if she can find it.

Cricket's only clue is a coin from a grown-over ghost town in the woods. So with her daddy's old guidebook and a coat full of snacks from the Cash 'n' Carry, Cricket runs away to find the room. Surviving in the woods isn't easy. While Cricket camps out in an old tree house and looks for clues, she meets the last resident of the ghost town, encounters a poetry-loving dog (who just might hold a key to part of the puzzle), and discovers that sometimes you have to get a little lost . . . to really find your way.

Contact: *If you're interested in more information or scheduling a visit with Jo, send an email to Caroline and Lauren at Gold Leaf Literary, goldleafliterary@gmail.com. Please use your city and state in the subject line.*

SMACK DAB IN THE MIDDLE OF MAYBE



*By Jo Watson Hackl
Discussion Guide by Pat Scales*

ABOUT THE BOOK

Ariana “Cricket” Overland moves in with Aunt Belinda after her father dies and her mentally ill mother disappears. One day Aunt Belinda accidentally leaves Cricket in Thelma’s Cash ‘n’ Carry grocery store. Cricket planned to run away all along, but when Aunt Belinda takes off, Cricket decides it is time. She takes refuge in the tree house that her father built in the woods near their small Mississippi hometown. The only things Cricket has for survival are her daddy’s guidebook and his jacket stuffed with a few snacks from Thelma’s. With a field cricket she names Charlene as her companion, Cricket sets out to find the Bird Room, a secret room painted by a mysterious artist, that her mother remembered from her childhood and has been searching for ever since. She told Cricket that she won’t stop looking for the room until she finds it. It’s important to Cricket that she proves the Bird Room exists so that she can lead her mama back to it. There are clues along the way, and when Cricket winds up at Miss V.’s house in the ghost town of Electric City, she makes a discovery much larger and more important than the Bird Room.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Ask students to read the Author’s Note at the end of the novel, and research the life and work of Walter Anderson. (<https://www.mswritersandmusicians.com/mississippi-writers/walter-anderson>)

Have them write a one-page paper that predicts the conflict of the novel. What is the main character seeking? Allow time in class for students to read aloud their paper.

Correlates to Common Core State Standards in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 4-6.1. Language: Convention of Standard English L. 4-6.1, L4-6.2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-6.3.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

Describe Aunt Belinda. Why was Aunt Belinda so willing to take Cricket to live with her? Discuss why she leaves Cricket behind. Cricket says that she should have seen the whole thing coming. What clues should Cricket have noticed? Cricket had planned to run away. Why is she angry that Aunt Belinda left her before she could leave her aunt?

Cricket’s dad had built a tree house in the woods, but Cricket had never been there alone. Why does Cricket go to the tree house rather than calling for help after Aunt Belinda leaves her behind? How does she know what she needs to survive in the woods alone? Discuss the things that go wrong.

Explain Charlene’s role in Cricket’s quest. Why does Cricket set Charlene free at the end of the novel?

What is the first hint that Cricket's mother suffers from mental illness? How did Cricket and her father deal with her mother's illness? What about her grandparents? Did they accept their daughter's differences? What does Aunt Belinda mean when she says Cricket's mama is "colorful"?

Why does Cricket feel responsible for her mama's disappearance? Explain why Cricket is so convinced that her mother is coming back.

Mental illness is often misunderstood. Explain what Miss V. means by, "Sometimes different makes people uncomfortable." (p. 186) Compare and contrast Bob and Cricket's mama. How did they both have a need to disappear? Cricket's mother would never share her art. Why didn't Bob want to share the Bird Room? Discuss Miss V.'s relationship to Bob. How did she accept his differences in the same way Cricket accepts her mama's condition?

Cricket's mama once told her to "always seek the beauty." Describe the beauty that surrounds Cricket in the woods. How is Cricket's mama "seeking beauty" when she searches for the Bird Room? Discuss other reasons why finding the Bird Room is important to Cricket's mama. Why is it so important for Cricket to find that room?

Why does Cricket lie to Miss V. about her parents? How does Miss V. know that Cricket is a runaway?

Describe Electric City. How did it become a ghost town? Why does Miss V. choose to live there?

Miss V. rescues Cricket when she suffers snakebite. Why does she forbid Cricket from snooping? What is Miss V. protecting? Discuss the unusual features of Miss V.'s house. How do these features arouse Cricket's curiosity?

Discuss the symbolism of the tanager. How does it serve as a clue that the Bird Room exists? What other clues does Cricket identify in Miss V.'s house?

Describe the Bird Room. Cricket says, "This was the music my mama had heard." (p. 132) Explain how a painter makes his or her art sing. Discuss whether Cricket hears the music of the Bird Room.

What is the significance of the treasure that Bob buried? Why does Miss V. doubt that a treasure exists? Why does Miss V. cry when they enter the Bird Room? Explain what Miss V. means by, "I knew I shouldn't have come back in this room." (p. 150)

Why does Miss V. finally give Cricket permission to show her mama the Bird Room? Explain why Cricket never has the chance to do that. Discuss what Cricket means by, "I didn't have to choose between loving mama and being mad at her for leaving. I was big enough to do both." (p. 220)

Explain why Miss V. decides to let Cricket stay. What can she offer Cricket that others can't?

The climax is the turning point in a story. What is the climax of the novel?

Discuss the title of the book. To what is "Maybe" referring? Analyze the cover. Debate the meaning of the arrows.

Correlates to Common Core State Standards in Reading Literature: Key Ideas & Details RL. 4-6.1, RL. 4-6.3; Craft & Structure RL. 4-6.4, RL. 4-6.6; Speaking & Listening: Comprehension & Collaboration SL. 4-6.1, SL. 4-6.3; Language: Convention of Standard English L. 4-6.1; Knowledge of Language L. 4-6.3; Vocabulary Acquisition & Use L. 4-6.5.



CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Ask students to read another novel where the main character survives alone in the wilderness. Suggest the following: *The Cay* by Theodore Taylor, *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen, *Julie of the Wolves* by Jean Craighead George, *My Side of the Mountain* by Jean Craighead George, and *Island of the Blue Dolphins* by Scott O'Dell. Then have them write a paper that contrasts the way Cricket and the protagonist of the other novel survives in the woods.

Correlates to Common Core State Standards in Reading Literature: Integration of Knowledge & Ideas RL. 5-6.9; Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 4-6.2; Language: Convention of Standard English L. 4-6.1, L4-6.2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-6.3.

Cricket's real name is Ariana, but her mother called her Cricket because it means "resourceful." Ask students to use Cricket as the spine word and write an acrostic poem that reveals her resourcefulness.

Correlates to Common Core State Standards in Writing: Production & Distribution of Writing W. 4-6.4.

Cricket runs away to live in a Southern forest. Ask students to identify the parts of the ecosystem in which she must survive. What resources are available to Cricket within the ecosystem? What elements in the ecosystem present threats to her? How does the ecosystem link science and geography? Have students consider the ecosystem in which they live, and the resources they would need to survive. Then have them write and illustrate a brochure titled *Living Off the Land* from two points of view, Cricket's and their own.

Correlates to Common Core State Standards in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 4-6.2; Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 4-6.7, W. 4-6.9; Language: Convention of Standard English L. 4-6.1, L4-6.2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-6.3.

Cricket won an opportunity to spend spring break at the Stokes School for the Arts. Write a letter that she might send to Miss V. telling her about her weeklong study at the school. Create sketches in the margins that Cricket might draw.

Correlates to Common Core State Standards in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 4-6.3; Language: Convention of Standard English L. 4-6.1, L4-6.2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-6.3.

"Maybe sometimes you need to go through the uncomfortable to find your way to the beautiful." (p. 186) Ask students to outline a sequence of uncomfortable events that lead Cricket to "the beautiful."

Correlates to Common Core State Standards in Reading Literature: Craft & Structure RL. 5-6.5

A simile is a figure of speech that uses "like" or "as" to compare two unlike things. Discuss the following simile: "The woods smelled like a hundred and fifty years of dark." (p. 19) Then have students write a simile that describes what Cricket feels when she sees the Bird Room.

Correlates to Common Core State Standards in Language: Vocabulary Acquisition & Use L. 4-6.5.

May is Mental Health Awareness Month. Mental Health America (<http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/may>) offers a toolkit for communities to use during this monthlong event. Ask students to identify places in their city or community where people may go for mental health counseling and support. Then have them create a full-page newspaper spread that lists these organizations, their contact information, the type of support they offer, etc.

Correlates to Common Core State Standards in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 4-6.2; Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 4-6.7.

Constellations of the Southern hemisphere are important to Cricket in solving the clue trail. Divide the class into small groups and assign each group a constellation of the Southern hemisphere to study. Instruct them to use books in the library or sites on the Internet to find specific information about the constellation. Have them create a chart of the night sky and label the assigned constellation. Have the group present a lesson about their constellation to the class.

Correlates to Common Core State Standards in Reading Informational Text: Integration of Knowledge & Ideas RI.4-6.7; Writing: Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 4-6.8; Speaking & Listening: Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 4-6.4.

Ask students to research facts about the scarlet tanager. (https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Scarlet_Tanager/id). What is its diet? Where does it make its nests? Does it live alone or in groups? How does one identify the male and female? What are their migration habits? Ask students to create a migration route on a map. Have them write a one-page entry on the Scarlet Tanager for a bird atlas.

Correlates to Common Core State Standards in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 4-6.2; Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 4-6.8; Language: Convention of Standard English L. 4-6.1, L4-6.2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-6.3; Speaking & Listening: Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 4-6.4.

Electric City, Mississippi is a ghost town. Have students read about ghost towns on the following website: <http://www.travelandleisure.com/slideshows/americas-coolest-ghost-towns#10>.

What caused each of these towns to become a ghost town? Take information from the novel and write a description of Electric City for the article in Travel & Leisure. Make the case that it should be considered a "cool" ghost town. Label the ten ghost towns and Electric City on a map of the United States.

Correlates to Common Core State Standards in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 4-6.1, W. 4-6.2; Language: Convention of Standard English L. 4-6.1, L4-6.2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-6.3

Divide the class into small groups and ask the groups to make an annotated bibliography of fiction and nonfiction for children and adolescents that addresses mental health issues. Have them begin with the holdings in their school and public library. Then have them use sites such as GoodReads (<https://www.goodreads.com/>) to identify additional titles. Suggest that they share their bibliography with the mental health organizations in their community.

Correlates to Common Core State Standards in Writing: Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 4-6.7.

VOCABULARY/USE OF LANGUAGE

The vocabulary in the novel isn't difficult, but students should be encouraged to jot down unfamiliar words and try to define them taking clues from context. Such words may include: *catapulted* (p. 7), *smidgeon* (p. 14), *meanderers* (p. 16), *privet* (p. 48), *mercy* (p. 96), *forage* (p. 115), and *dowser* (p. 177).

Correlates to Common Core State Standards in Language: Vocabulary Acquisition & Use L. 4-6.4.





Book Club Questions for Young Readers

1. How are you similar to Cricket? In what ways are you different?
2. If you were left at a store alone, what would you do?
3. How did Cricket change throughout the story?
4. Name three special skills Cricket used to get her through her dilemma.
5. Name three special skills you have that you can use when you're in a tight spot.
6. How would the story have changed if Charlene wasn't with Cricket?
7. If you had an adventure like Cricket's, what kind of animal would you take as your companion?
8. Think about the ways another person's health has affected you. What are some compassionate ways you would help or have helped someone who had a health problem?
9. In the story, Cricket feels badly about how she acted the last time she was with her mom. Have you felt this way? If so, how did you handle it?
10. Name a poet whose work speaks to you.
11. After reading *Smack Dab in the Middle of Maybe*, will you start reading more poetry? Will you read it aloud to your pet(s)?
12. Have you ever been moved by a piece of art? If so, what was it and how did it affect you?
13. Miss V. is a friend of Cricket's and a distant relative. Even though they are much different ages, they still learn from each other. Have you ever had a friend who wasn't an immediate family member that you thought of as family? What did you learn from that person?
14. Miss V.'s use of a madstone is an example of a folk remedy. Folk remedies are methods of healing illness and injury without doctors and medicine. Have you ever used a folk remedy? What was it?
15. Would you ever want to live in a ghost town? Why or why not?
16. Cricket is comfortable being out in nature. Are you? In what ways have you interacted with nature?
17. If you were Cricket in the story, what would you have done differently?
18. What do you think is the most important thing Cricket learned during the course of *Smack Dab in the Middle of Maybe*?
19. If you could give Cricket one piece of advice, what would it be?
20. If you could ask the author one question, what would it be?

Smack Dab in the Middle of Maybe

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