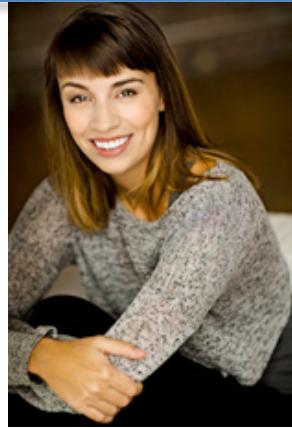


STUDY GUIDE for

The Explorers: The Door in the Alley

By Adrienne Kress





ABOUT ADRIENNE KRESS, AUTHOR OF *THE EXPLORERS: THE DOOR IN THE ALLEY:*

Adrienne Kress is a writer and an actress born and raised in Toronto, Canada. She is the daughter of two high school English teachers, and credits them for her love of both writing and performing. She has a cat named Atticus, who unfortunately despises teeny hats. Look for her online at AdrienneKress.com and follow her on Twitter and Instagram at @AdrienneKress.

PRE-READING

The pre-reading phase in the study of a novel is usually meant to prepare students to read fiction in general and to acquaint students with some of the facts and issues particular to the specific work under study – especially any facts and issues that may lie outside their experience.

Activity 1: For the “fiction in general” part, we suggest class discussions of a question that middle grade students rarely get to talk about: **When a book is classified as “fiction,” that means that all or part of it is untrue. It’s made up. It’s “a lie.” What do we gain from reading stories that are not true?** The traditional answer, is this: first, entertainment; secondly education in the form of facts and in the form of insights into human nature. If you think about it, these are the two things teachers generally ask questions about when they study literature with a class. The “entertainment” issues often lead to questions about the author’s writing techniques. The “education” (or “information”) issues often lead to questions about character and theme.

Activity 2: The students may know very little about the sorts of buildings, organizations and

traditions that go with the title and subject matter of *The Explorers*. In locating some of the action of her book in a clubhouse for “explorers,” the author is calling to mind people like Shackleton, Hillary, Cook and Byrd, as well as the grand old societies of explorers that assisted them, funded their research and provided social interaction with like-minded people. Here’s a way of acquainting your students with the world of explorers: Form groups of 3-4 students. Give each group the name of an explorers’ organization and this list of questions:

- 1. In what year was your organization founded? Is it still functioning today?**
- 2. Which sciences do the members represent?**
- 3. Name at least one notable achievement of at least one of the members, past or present.**
- 4. Where is the headquarters of the organization? Provide a picture of the building if possible.**
- 5. How does one become a member?**
- 6. What are two of the organization’s present project (if the group is still functioning).**
- 7. Would you want to be a member of this organization? Why or why not?**



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Once your students have had a chance to get the information, host a sharing session with the whole class. If you have too large a class to make the above activity practical, divide your class in half. Give one half (in groups) the activity above. Give the other half an explorer to research. Questions about explorers:

- 1. What are the birth (and death) dates of your explorer?**
- 2. What did your subject set out to explore? Why?**
- 3. Does (or did) your explorer belong to any organizations? If so, which one(s)?**
- 4. Was the work successful? Explain.**
- 5. Describe the personality of your explorer. Give examples from the explorer's life to show what you mean.**

Before you go into the next section, you may want to try this: Go to

<<http://www.royalexplorersclub.com/>> Click on “Prospectum.” The site is a tongue-in-cheek website for a fictitious organization. Under “Prospectum,” however, the people responsible have a short narrated film clip that talks about what sort of personality it takes to be an explorer. The students may find it interesting and entertaining. At the same time it raises the issue of what dedication to exploring is all about.

Some information you may find helpful:

Some Explorers' Organizations

Royal Society, London

Royal Geographical Society, London

Explorers Club, New York City

American Geographical Society, New York City

National Geographic Society, Washington, DC

Royal Canadian Geographical Society, Ottawa

Royal Geographical Society of South Australia, Adelaide

Some Explorers

Gertrude Bell

Mary Kingsley

Henry Hudson

Robert Falcon Scott

David Livingstone

Sir Walter Raleigh

Lewis and Clark

Richard Byrd

Neil Armstrong

Daniel Boone

Sacagawea

Robert Edwin Perry

DURING-READING ACTIVITIES

As mentioned in the lead-up to the pre-reading activities, fiction has two goals – to **entertain** and to **educate**. While activities done during the reading of the novel help to ensure that the students are comprehending what's happening in the story, they also act as a basis for a deeper understanding of the goals of entertaining and educating. A good approach is to give students the responsibility to make notes on particular features as they are reading the *The Explorers* so that they may later teach the rest of the class by sharing insights and examples. The students, as individuals or in groups, focus on just one of the questions below as they read the novel.

[Note: Some sample answers taken from the first chapter for each topic are provided to give the students a model to use.]

A. Entertain:

1. Humor – How does humor show up in the *The Explorers*? Puns, jokes, ridiculous characters and situations, etc. What does humor add to the novel?

[e.g. The first sentence starts with the narrator creating a picture of “a pig wearing a teeny hat.” Right away we know that silliness will be a big part of the story, so we are looking for places to laugh.]

2. Mystery/Suspense – What difficult problems that have no obvious solutions are there for the reader to think about? What suspenseful thing or things have happened that make the reader wonder what will happen and how things will turn out for the characters?

[e.g. Suspense – “And it was, obviously, Arthur who messed everything up.” We wonder what got messed up and why it was Arthur’s fault. “But it was too late. Oh how too late it was.”



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Using the word “too” twice in two very short sentences makes us really wonder, “Too late for what?”]

3. Action – Which scenes are filled with fast-paced (even frantic) movement, danger, etc.? Which scenes are slower paced? As a reader, why do you need scenes that have a lot of action and scenes that have very little?

[e.g. The first chapter has very little physical action. The boys are just walking home from school. This gives us time to get to know them by what they are thinking, saying and how they are reacting to each other.]

4. Style – Examine the author’s use of language choices, vocabulary, and literary devices (like the tone of the narrator, use of footnotes) in order to enhance the reader’s experience of reading the novel.

[Note: This is a large category. You might want to assign Vocabulary as a separate topic since there are many new words in *The Explorers* because the author plays with words, using words that you don’t usually connect with 11-year-olds (“actuary,” “pragmatic,” “spontaneity”) to show Sebastian’s personality. You may also want to keep the words specifically connected with exploring for topic B1.]

[e.g. i) Footnotes: It’s very unusual for novels to have footnotes. The author is using them to add humor to the story by making observations that are often slightly off-topic, but interesting to think about. ii) Grammar: “culs-de-sac” – how do you pluralize hyphenated words? “The Explorers Society” – what is the proper use of the apostrophe? How is meaning changed by

misusing it? iii) Misusing grammar for fun – “What could be wiser...gooder...than that?”]

B. Educate:

1. Facts, problems and theories, etc. – What new facts, vocabulary, history does the reader learn?

[e.g. Vocabulary: “Explorer” seems like an ordinary word, but it captures Sebastian’s imagination and he can’t stop thinking about what explorers did in the past or what they do now (if they still exist) or who can be an explorer.]

2. Psychology/Character – Literature is about what is involved in being human. Do the characters’ behaviour, habits, thoughts and emotional personality traits ring true? Does their behaviour match their personality traits?

[e.g. From the first chapter, we know that Sebastian has routines that he follows regularly (how he travels home), that he is interested in science, he likes to be efficient, he enjoys school and learning, he’s logical. But he may be a little too invested in his routines.]

3. Important questions – Novels occasionally cause readers to think about “the Big Questions.” In *The Explorers*, for example, notions of ethics and morality (e.g. fairness, loyalty, commitment, etc.) are often brought up. Note where these behaviours show up and whether the characters have an easy or hard time deciding how to behave.

[e.g. Sebastian displays loyalty. He doesn’t agree that the teacher is being unfair to Arthur, but, when Arthur takes the wrong way home, and challenges Sebastian by saying, “Would be nice if you had my back once in a while,



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though,” Sebastian goes with him and even tries to comfort him when the alley gets creepy.]

Note: One way of taking up the homework is to allow all the students to take the first part of each class to discuss their answers with the other students doing their topic. Have each group come up with one quotation or example from the section under discussion that brings out their point clearly. Have them put this on a large piece of paper to place at the front of the room and use it to lead a discussion on the topic.

If you use the same sheet paper every day, by the end of the reading phase, each topic will have a complete list that can be used for summary, review and/or evaluation.

POST-READING ACTIVITIES

These may be topics for class discussions or short writing assignments:

1. Stop the reading just before the final chapter (chapter 27 “In which we come to the end”): Predict what’s going to happen next to Evie and Sebastian. Make sure your predictions fit with what has happened so far and what you know about their personalities.

2. After the epilogue: Predict what’s going to happen next. While your predictions should fit the personalities of Evie and Sebastian, you can let your imagination go free.

3. Near the end of Chapter 5, Myrtle Algren tells Sebastian that she feels he needs extra help “with pushing the boundaries, with breaking the rules, with getting [himself] into trouble.” It’s for this reason that she asks him to do “something inappropriate” in the next week. (a) Do you agree that people need to push boundaries in order to grow up properly? Why or why not? (b) Does Sebastian’s doing

something inappropriate change him over the course of the story? How can you tell?

4. Does The Explorers Society resemble the organization that you researched? How do you account for the differences?

5. Do you think that Sebastian and/or Evie are good candidates to be explorers themselves? Why or why not?

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