

QUESTION AND ANSWER WITH KATHRYN ERSKINE

Q: What inspired you to write *Mockingbird* in first person? Did you ever consider telling the story from a different perspective?

A: I wanted to use first person to really get inside Caitlin's head and have readers see the world the way she sees it. If they could live in her shoes, I felt they could better understand why she talks and behaves the way she does.

Q: The issue of dealing with loss manifests itself throughout *Mockingbird*. What inspired you to use this as a major theme throughout the novel?

A: Overcoming losses, having hope that things will be better, is a major theme in all my books because I'm a big believer in hope. Despite the losses we suffer, we can still gain something -- it may not be the same, but it can still be good. Sometimes, a person you don't expect, a person who's not exactly great with people, a person like Caitlin, can pave the way for great healing.

Q: On your website, you include a music playlist for each of your books; can you tell us why you built these playlists and what inspired you to include these specific selections for *Mockingbird*?

A: For *Mockingbird*, the obvious songs were themes from "To Kill a Mockingbird" because Caitlin makes me think of Scout in the movie, and the wonderful James Taylor / Carly Simon version of "Mockingbird". The line from the song that kept running through my head was, "Hear me now and understand." Most of the other songs on my list are for kids and they're about issues Caitlin has to deal with, such as empathy and sharing.

Q: Aspiring writers are often told to write what they know; how have you followed that sage advice?

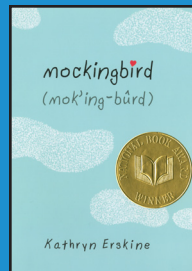
A: My daughter was diagnosed with Asperger's in 2nd grade. It explained a lot. I do believe that there's much we can do to help those on the autism spectrum learn about and understand our world. At the same time, I think we can learn much of value from people who see the world differently.

Q: What influences your writing?

A: Life. That may sound silly, but I'm influenced by everything around me all the time. Suffering of any kind speaks to me very loudly which is why, I suppose, my books tend to have heavy themes. But the focus is on handling the suffering, dealing with the problems and, in the end, triumphing. That's how I like to write my world, both in books and real life.

MOCKINGBIRD

by Kathryn Erskine



HC: 978-0-399-25264-8 • \$15.99



PB: 978-0-14-241775-1 • \$7.99

Ages 10 up • Grades 5 up

• National Book Award Winner

"No one should miss this remarkable and moving experience"

—Andrew Clements, author of the bestselling *Frindle* and *Things Not Seen*

"Mockingbird is a lovely, perceptive, and poignant story"

—Sharon Creech, author of the Newbery Medal-winning *Walk Two Moons*

"This will grab you by the heart and throat, give you a good shake, and then set you cheering for the human spirit"

—Jim Trelease, author of the preeminent *The Read-Aloud Handbook*

Also by Kathryn Erskine



QUAKING

HC: 978-0-399-24774-3 • \$16.99

PB: 978-0-14-241476-7 • \$7.99

Ages 11 up • Grades 6 up

After years of moving to new foster homes, fourteen year old Matt has learned to rely on herself at school and everywhere. But she moves in with peaceful Quakers Sam and Jessica and starts to find herself getting involved despite her best efforts—especially when conflict arises in town and at school over the war in the Middle East.

• A Virginia Readers Choice Selection

• An ALA Quick Pick Top Ten

• A VOYA "Top Shelf Fiction for Middle School Readers" Selection

HOW TO START YOUR OWN BOOK CLUB

Think it would be hard to start your own book club? Think again!

All you need is a little bit of organization
and some friends who are as excited about the books they read as you are.

Here are a few tips to get you started:

The best way to find people to be in your reading group is to ask your friends.

Think of all the people you know who like to read, and ask them to join. If you still don't feel like you have enough people, ask each of your friends to bring someone else. You can usually get a good discussion going with six to eight people, but any number that is comfortable for you will work. If you're having trouble finding enough cool people to form your reading group, check with your school, local library, or bookstore to see if there's a group that you can join.

Figure out when and where you want to meet.

Some groups meet once a month, some meet every other month. You could get together at someone's house, in a park, on the beach, or in your school's library. If it sounds too official and overwhelming to decide all the "wheres" and "whens" right now, don't worry! It's your group and so you get to make all the decisions. All you have to do is get together once, and you can work out the rest of the details later.

Decide how you will choose books and how the discussions will be run.

Maybe you have a favorite author that you and your friends would like to focus on. Or maybe you want to take turns picking your favorite book. Maybe one person likes to talk and would like to lead the discussion, or maybe you would rather just all get together and talk about the books you are reading. If you get stuck, you can often find discussion questions online (try the publisher's website) or at your local library or bookstore.

The most important thing to remember is that there's no right or wrong way to have a reading group. Do what you're comfortable with and always have fun, and your group will be a success!

For more discussion guides to get your group going,
visit www.penguin.com/teachersandlibrarians.



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DISCUSSION GUIDE

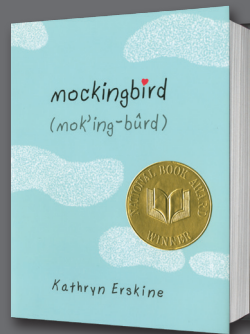
"Extraordinary... [A] moving and insightful masterpiece."
—Publishers Weekly

mockingbird



KATHRYN ERSKINE

ABOUT THE BOOK



In Caitlin's world, everything is black or white. Things are good or bad. Anything in between is confusing. That's the stuff Caitlin's older brother, Devon, has always explained. But now Devon's dead, and their father cries a lot. Caitlin wants to get over it, but as an eleven-year-old girl with Asperger's, she doesn't know how. When she reads the definition of "closure" in the dictionary, she realizes that is what she and

her father need. In her search for closure, Caitlin discovers that not everything is black and white—the world is full of colors—messy and beautiful, and it is through this discovery that she embarks on a road which leads her to find both healing and closure.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



As a resident of Virginia, KATHRYN ERSKINE was devastated by the 2007 shootings at Virginia Tech. In the aftermath of this tragedy, she was driven to understand how community and family—particularly families with special-needs children—dealt with this violent event, and how our lives might be different if we understood each other better. In writing *Mockingbird* and telling the story of Caitlin, a young girl with Asperger's syndrome, she walked into the fragile world herself, and like Caitlin, offers us something "good and strong and beautiful."

Kathryn was a lawyer for fifteen years before turning to her first love, writing. Her debut novel, *Quaking*, was one of YALSA's Top Ten Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers. She lives in Virginia with her husband, two children, and her dog, Maxine.

Visit her on her website at www.kathyerskine.com.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In what ways is Devon's unfinished chest symbolic of the loss of Devon? How has it impacted the rest of Caitlin's family? Although her father has covered the chest with a sheet, why do you think he chooses to keep it in their home?
- Caitlin's father tells her that, "The whole town is upset by what happened. They want to help. They want to help you deal with life, Caitlin...without Devon." (p.5) How do readers know Caitlin isn't dealing with the loss of her brother? What are some of the behaviors she displays that verify how she's doing?
- Devon served as a navigator to Caitlin as he helped her understand and explore the world; how does his absence make it significantly more difficult for her to deal with others? What are some of the specific kinds of things Devon did to help his sister? What was his motivation in doing these things? Did he stand to gain anything for assisting her?
- Do you believe Caitlin's father is providing her the support she needs? Why or why not?
- *Mockingbird* is told in first person; how would the story be different if someone besides Caitlin were telling it? Do you think changing the point of view would make the story better or worse? Why?
- Based on instructions on how to act, Caitlin reminds herself to "Look At The Person." Why do you think this is particularly difficult for her? Why is each word in that phrase capitalized? What other phrases have that same treatment? What function do they serve to the reader as well as to Caitlin?
- Why is Mrs. Brook important to Caitlin? Why does Caitlin trust her and not some of the other adults she encounters at school? What does her absence at school mean to Caitlin?
- Asperger's and autism often exhibit ritualistic behaviors; what are some of Caitlin's? How do these actions make her feel? Discuss whether you believe she should be allowed to engage in these activities or if she would be better served by being forbidden or stopped.
- What are the reasons Caitlin dislikes recess? How does recess for older kids compare to recess for younger kids?
- Describe Josh. What motivates him to behave the way he does? Do you think he has a valid reason for being so angry? How does Caitlin feel about Josh? Why might she feel so strongly about him? Why might others?

- When considering her passion for books, Caitlin states, "You can open and close books a million times and they stay the same. They look the same. They say the same words. The charts and pictures are the same colors. Books are not like people. Books are safe." (p.34) What can we infer about her statement? Do you agree with Caitlin? Provide some examples from the story to validate her point.
- When Josh and Caitlin have an altercation on the playground, their classmates come to Caitlin's defense and even team up against Josh, but later, some of these same students laugh and tease Caitlin about her behavior—why would they choose to behave this way and what do we learn from this contradictory behavior?
- Caitlin's friendship with Michael sends her down a path where she learns what it means to want a friend and be a friend. Why is she so threatened by his friendship with Josh? What can Josh gain from this relationship? Consider your friendships—how do these relationships affect you? Can they make you a better person? If so, in what ways?
- One of the ways Devon and Caitlin connected was through their shared appreciation for the movie, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Why was this particular movie so special to them? In what ways were they similar to the characters in the film?
- Throughout the course of the novel, Caitlin tries to understand the meaning of closure. What are some of the events that help her achieve closure? How does her understanding of the concept of closure change?
- Why is Caitlin so insistent that she and her father finish Devon's chest? What does she hope to accomplish by completing this project? What happens during the course of finishing the chest and how does that affect both Caitlin and her father?
- Though she is a gifted artist, Caitlin is fearful of using color in her work and her work doesn't involve human subjects. Why do these things make her uncomfortable? How is this indicative of her disability?
- As her father shares his struggles with his sister, Caitlin remarks, "I try not to listen to Dad because I've had all the empathy I can take right now. Empathy can make you feel really sad." (p.128) What does Caitlin's statement tell us about her level of understanding concepts like empathy and finesse? Do you think she is changing? Why or why not?
- Using the phrase, "This is a story about..." supply five words to describe *Mockingbird*. Explain your choices.
- How has Caitlin matured from dealing with the loss of her brother? What has she learned? How have the people to whom Caitlin is closest learned from her as well?

RESEARCH AND ACTIVITIES

- Author Kathryn Erskine created a playlist of the music she listened to as she wrote *Mockingbird*, which you can find below. Consider the story and create a CD with an original playlist for the novel. Create original art for the jewel case and on the interior, and after including appropriate artist information, offer an explanation for the selection of each song.

Kathryn Erskine's Mockingbird Music Playlist

- Elmer Bernstein, "To Kill a Mockingbird"
- Elmer Bernstein, "Footsteps in the Dark"
- Cathy Bollinger, "Everyone has Strengths to be Proud of"
- Rolf Harris, "You Ride Your Way and I'll Ride Mine"
- Judy Kuhn, "Colors of the Wind"
- Martina McBride, "Through Your Eyes"
- John McCutcheon, "Kindergarten Wall"
- The Mosaic Project, "Empathy Song"
- Randy Newman, "You've got a Friend in Me"
- Raffi, "Sharing Song"
- Carly Simon & James Taylor, "Mockingbird"
- Steve Miller Band, "Fly like an Eagle"

- Though many schools have anti-bullying programs which include conversations about acceptance of differences, little formal instruction is offered to "typical" students about their peers who fall on the Autism Spectrum. Working in small groups, draft a plan for a school wide program which helps define ASD's (Autism Spectrum Disorders) and shares common behavior patterns and rationalizations for those behaviors. Be sure to include ways program ideas which allow "typical" students to serve as social models and buddies.
- Throughout the novel, Josh struggles greatly because he feels that others blame him for being related to one of the school shooters. Using Josh's voice, write a journal entry in which you detail the playground event and the altercation with Caitlin. To prepare, create an outline using the five W's (who, what, when, where, and why). Remember to write in first person and give special attention to sensory imagery (what you saw, smelled, heard, etc.)