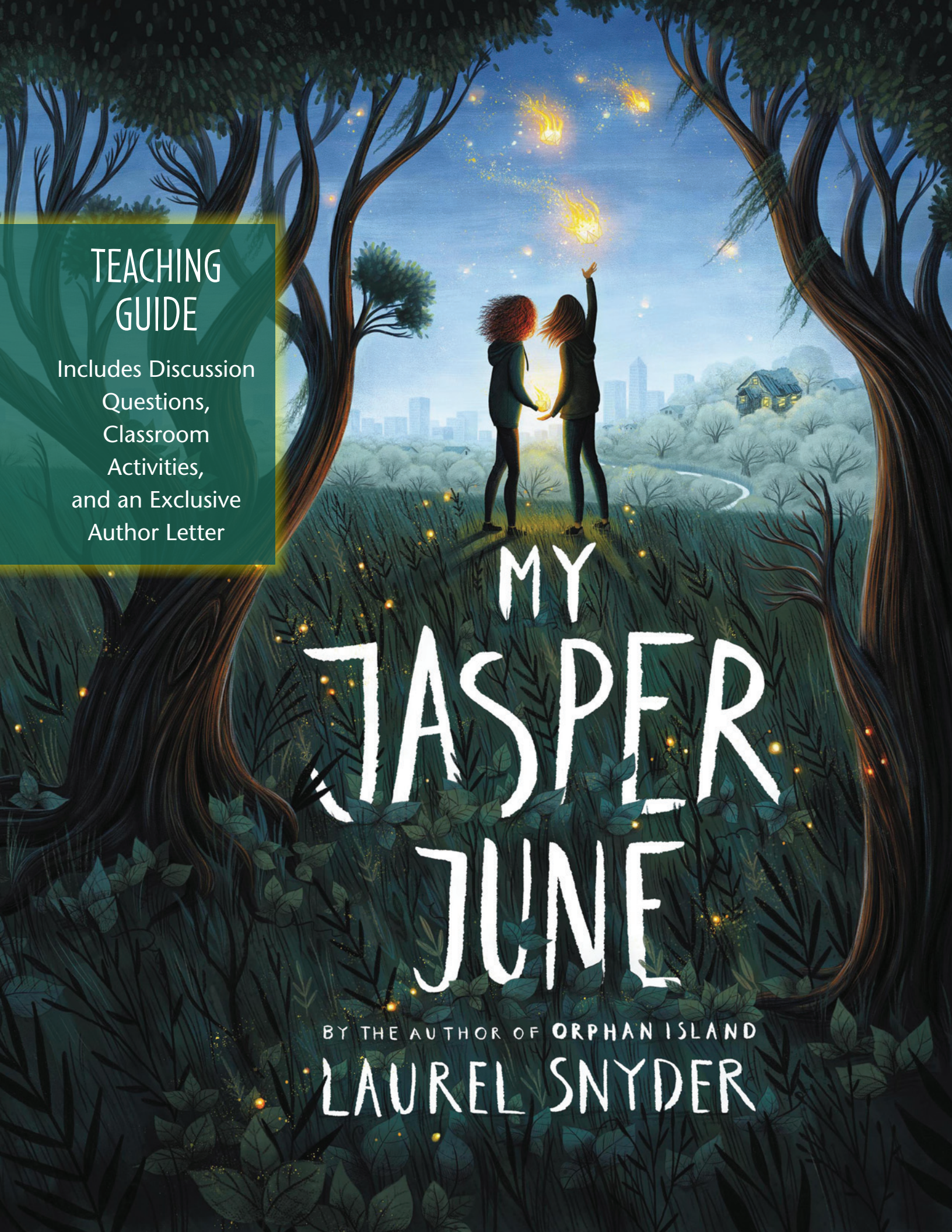

TEACHING GUIDE
Includes Discussion Questions, Classroom Activities, and an Exclusive Author Letter
MY JASPER JUNE
BY THE AUTHOR OF ORPHAN ISLAND
LAUREL SNYDER

About the Book

Laurel Snyder, author of *Orphan Island*, returns with another unforgettable story of the moments in which we find out who we are, and the life-altering friendships that show us what we can be.



The school year is over, and it is summer in Atlanta. The sky is blue, the sun is blazing, and the days brim with possibility. But Leah feels. . . lost. She has been this way since one terrible afternoon a year ago, when everything changed. Since that day, her parents have become distant, her friends have fallen away, and Leah's been adrift and alone.

Then she meets Jasper, a girl unlike anyone she has ever known. There's something mysterious about Jasper, almost magical. And Jasper, Leah discovers, is also lost.

Together, the two girls carve out a place for themselves, a hideaway in the overgrown spaces of Atlanta, away from their parents and their hardships, somewhere only they can find.

But as the days of this magical June start to draw to a close, and the darker realities of their lives intrude once more, Leah and Jasper have to decide how real their friendship is, and whether it can be enough to save them both.

R. J. Palacio, author of *Wonder*, had this to say:
"This book is a treasure — a touching story of friendship, loss, and finding beauty in the everyday, with characters who stay with you long after you've turned the final page. I absolutely loved it."

About the Author



Laurel Snyder is the author of picture books and novels for children, including National Book Award nominee *Orphan Island* and the Theodor Seuss Geisel Award winner *Charlie & Mouse*. A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, she currently teaches in Hamline University's MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults program. She lives in Atlanta with her family and can be found online at

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A Letter from Laurel Snyder about *My Jasper June*

Dear Reader,

I mostly write books that involve magic, so magic is something people ask me about often. Interviewers will say, "When you were a kid, if a fairy had granted you a wish, what would you have wished for?" The funny thing is, I never used to have an answer that felt right. I'd just say that I wanted to fly, and the interviewer would nod and move along.

But the more I thought about the question, the clearer it became to me that the thing I wanted most as a kid was not to fly or have a pet unicorn or a pile of money. What I really wanted was a REAL friend. The kind of friend who makes you feel safe, wanted.

I remember so well the feeling of sitting in a room of kids and wondering how they all did it. How did they just know how to talk to each other? How did they avoid rejection? I felt so awkward, always. I was too loud. My clothes were wrong. My lunch was weird.

My Jasper June is about a lot of things. It's about grief, and how we face it. It's about what happens when families stop talking. It's about how sometimes, we outgrow our lives, and find new ones. It's about secret summery vine-tangled spaces.

But most of all, it's about the very great magic of finding your one true friend — the person who never thinks your clothes are wrong, who will always share your weird lunch. It's about how powerful you become when you find that person.

I hope you'll love Leah and Jasper. I'm so grateful to you for reading.

All my best,

Laurel Snyder

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Discussion Questions

1 "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." This quote from singer/songwriter Leonard Cohen opens the book. What did you think when you first read this quote? How did you think it would relate to the story? What did you think about the quote after you finished reading the book?

2 "The heavy doors of the school swung open, and we all burst out into the heat, scattering across the lawn. It was like something had exploded inside the building and hurled us into summer" (**page 1**). How does Laurel Snyder immediately put the reader in a very specific place and time with the opening sentences of this book? What feelings do they evoke in you? And what do we soon begin to understand about Leah when this joyful imagery is contrasted with her inner desire to just go home and be alone?

3 On **page 3**, Leah notes: "Everything was a tradition in Ormewood Park." She reflects on these traditions — the last day of school, Friday night neighborhood parties, Halloween, sledding, and she and Tess being best friends. Everything had always been the same. "I found myself thinking about how it might feel to live somewhere different. Where it wasn't always the same. Where you could go straight home, alone, on the last day of school, if you were feeling tired, no matter what the traditions were." How do you think Leah feels about these traditions? How would you feel about living in a place with such deep-seated traditions? Would you find it comforting or stifling? What are some traditions where you live?

4 Leah says, "It's funny to think now about how everything might have turned out, or not turned out, if I hadn't cut through Red's Farm. It would have been a different June, that's for sure. It would have been a different summer, and a different everything. But I did walk into Red's Farm, and I did stop at the creek, and when I stopped, I saw her for the first time. Jasper" (**page 20**). When you read this introduction to Leah's relationship with Jasper, where did you think it might lead?

5 Leah has an unusual response to Jasper when they first meet. What is it about Jasper that causes Leah to feel as she does? What were your first impressions of Jasper?

6 Why do you think Leah and Jasper bond so quickly and intensely? What brings them together? What makes them kindred spirits?

7 On the other hand, what do Leah and Jasper not have in common? What makes them different? What do they disagree about? How do these differences make their friendship stronger?

8 Discuss the theme of loss in *My Jasper June*. How is each character coping with different feelings of loss? Some characters have experienced more than one important loss in a short period of time. How does each character process grief? How does each begin to pull out of sadness as the story moves on?

9 Leah often brings up the idea of ghosts (see **page 184** for example). She thinks her parents have become ghosts since Sam passed away. Sometimes she feels like a ghost of her former self. She thinks that sometimes people in town treat her family like ghosts. What does she mean by this metaphor? How does Jasper understand this feeling that Leah has, but also resent it at the same time?

Discussion Questions (continued)

10 "It isn't a contest, pain. And sometimes, you can't make it go away no matter what you do. You just have to carry it around, you know?" (**page 236**). Discuss what Jasper means by this. How does her observation apply to this story?

11 Throughout *My Jasper June*, Leah gradually learns more and more about Jasper's family and her past. She says, "In some parts of my brain, I knew there were words for what was happening to Jasper. Runaway. Homeless. But the more time I spent with her, the less crazy it seemed that she could take care of herself. Jasper…seemed to have things under control" (**page 150**). How does Leah convince herself that things are ok? How does she talk herself out of telling an adult about what's going on? Contemplate why Leah might make these choices, especially during this difficult period in her own family's life.

12 Discuss the moment on **page 262** when Leah breaks down and tells her parents about Jasper's situation. Consider the buildup to this moment — the promises that Leah made to Jasper, and all the effort that Jasper has made to keep her secret. Do you think that Leah did the right thing by telling the truth, or did she betray her best friend? Or both? Could she have handled the situation differently? Should she have said something sooner or not at all? At what point does helping a friend be safe take precedence over keeping your word?

13 Leah and Jasper learn a lot from each other during this important summer. They learn things about life, family, friendship, the realities of the world, and even things about their own city. What does Leah specifically learn from Jasper? What does Jasper learn from Leah?

14 Explain how Leah's "crack in the cup" metaphor (on **page 278**) relates to the year her family has had.

15 Now, consider Leah's mom's "I'd rather be smashing the patriarchy" coffee mug, the actual cracked cup. What does this expression mean? How does Leah's mom embody this message?

16 Discuss the importance of the movie *Field of Dreams* in this book. Why is this movie referenced multiple times? How is the plot of that movie relevant to the story? (If you haven't seen it, you might need to look it up!)

17 Reflect on the themes of loneliness and family that run throughout *My Jasper June*. What do Jasper, Leah, and Leah's parents learn about each other? How do they change and grow during this story?

18 Leah interacts with a mouse multiple times in this story. What exactly happens with Leah and the mouse? What does the mouse represent?

19 Consider the role that the city of Atlanta and the neighborhood of Ormewood Park play in this story. How is the setting an important part of *My Jasper June*? How does Laurel Snyder make the setting come alive for the reader through specific details of the people, sights, sounds, and smells?

20 Study the cover of *My Jasper June*. After reading the book, think about the ways the images and colors on the cover evoke the themes of the book. Did your impression of the cover change after you read the book?

Activities

1 When Jasper first introduces Leah to Vine Realm, Leah thinks of it as a fun secret hideaway, "like a doorway to another world, our little world" (**page 144**). Before she recognizes the seriousness of the situation that Jasper is in, the Vine Realm feels exciting, adult, and at times a relief from the stressful environment of Leah's own home. Put yourself in Leah's shoes in the beginning of the story. Think about what you would want for your own secret hideaway. What would you call it? Where would it be? What would it look like? Who would you share it with?

2 Like Jasper and Leah's Vine Realm, other famous, well-loved books feature kids who have a secret hideout. *Bridge to Terabithia* is one good example. Create a list of other such books, and compare and share recommendations.

3 When discussing their shared Jewish heritage, Jasper says to Leah, "Whenever there's a Jewish character in a movie or something, a little flare goes up in my head, like I'm sort of connected to it, in a way" (**page 202**). Have you ever felt this way — reacting to aspects of your identity as portrayed in media? Create a list of books, characters, songs, movies, TV shows, games, etc., that have made you feel seen in this way. Make a list of characteristics of yourself that you would like to be represented more often. Why is it important for everyone to experience this feeling?

4 Leonard Cohen's song "Anthem" can be seen as a theme song for *My Jasper June*. A quote from "Anthem" opens the book. The song is clearly meaningful to Jasper's mother. The lyrics fit so well in the story that they really speak to Leah when she listens to it during "the sad game." If you had to choose your own theme song, either for your whole life, for how you feel right now, or for a specific moment in time, what would you choose? Why is that song important to you? What is it about the lyrics or the melody that speaks to you? What memories does the song evoke?

5 If "Anthem" is the theme song of *My Jasper June*, *Field of Dreams* could be considered the "theme movie." It's clearly an important movie to Leah's dad, since he is painting a mural of the cornfields from the film in the garage. When Leah sees the film herself, she understands why it resonates so much with their lives. If you had to think of your own "theme movie," what would you choose? Think of a movie that is relevant to your life, or one that is very meaningful to you or your family.

6 "The sad game" is something that Jasper's mother made up to play when they're feeling down. Instead of trying to cheer themselves up, they would lean into the sadness, and immerse themselves in sad movies, songs, and thoughts. Let's flip the script on this game, and make up "the happy game." Make a list of some go-to things that make you feel happy whenever you encounter them. Come up with a list of books, songs, food, videos, movies, episodes of TV shows, or anything else that you can have ready to go when you need a boost. Compare your list with those made by your classmates. Get recommendations for other things to add to your list!

7 Throughout *My Jasper June*, Leah makes many observations about how to live in the world. For example: "Just because things are hard doesn't mean life isn't still full of good things" (**page 206**); "You're only strangers if you choose to be strangers" (**page 271**); and "You know, it's funny, how once you see something unbelievable happen a few times, it stops being so unbelievable" (**page 289**). Pick some of your favorites. Discuss them as a group.