

DISCUSSION GUIDE



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WALKER
BOOKS

After, Pádraig Kenny

Discussion Guide

ABOUT THE BOOK

Kenny's latest novel, *After*, is a classic post-apocalyptic tale of hubris, hope and new beginnings. Immediately accessible and full of vividly imagined detail, this sure-fire hit sees Jen and Father wandering through the world following 'the flood' – a mysterious apocalyptic event brought on by out of control 'Meks' – heading for a long-dreamed of haven. With scavengers to avoid, and supplies hard to come by, when they find a happy and prosperous settlement, things seem to be improving. But with Father not all that he seems, the shadow of 'Meks' still hanging over the world, and long held secrets about the past coming to the surface, Jen must decide her own fate or risk losing everything she's ever known. Accentuated by perfectly fitting illustrations from Steve McCarthy, Kenny's pacy, punchy novel will delight readers young and old.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pádraig Kenny is an Irish writer from County Kildare, now living in Limerick. Previously an arts journalist, teacher and librarian's assistant, he now writes full-time. His first novel *Tin* and the more recent *The Monsters of Rookhaven* were both Waterstones Books of the Month. He has twice won the Children's Books Ireland Honour Award for Fiction, has been nominated for the Carnegie Medal and shortlisted for the Irish Book Awards.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION:

After contains lots of elements to discuss and explore, from the specifics of the story to the wider context of post-apocalyptic literature and storytelling. With its immediate relevance in the face of increasing AI integration, and its accessible style and length, it is a timely and thought-provoking novel to engage any number of readers. Beyond the post-apocalyptic themes, however, there remain elements that relate to children now – parental loss, non-nuclear families, loneliness. Care should be taken when discussing these elements with groups.

This guide suggests broad themes and a range of questions to explore with groups – flex the level of questioning according to your group's needs and ability.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Getting started:

What did anyone like about *After*? Why? Can anyone expand on their answer? Did anyone have a favourite part, or a favourite character?

1. Beginning at the End

"Tell me again how the world ended." – p.5

What sort of story was it? Introduce the term 'post-apocalyptic' (if appropriate to your group). What does this mean? Break the word down and explore as a group. Can anyone think of any other examples of post-apocalyptic stories they've read or seen? Why are we interested in these sorts of stories?

2. Jen

'Jen narrowed her eyes at him. "I make sense."' – p.8

How are we introduced to Jen? What were anyone's first impressions? Can anyone describe her 'character'?

(check understanding/what we mean by someone's character as opposed to 'a character' in a story). What words might describe her?

3. Father

'The clang of metal against metal echoed through the library.' – p.20

Did anyone work out the truth about Father before it was revealed on page 20? What clues does Kenny give the reader? What did anyone think of Father? Is he a person? Why? Or why not? Why does Jen call him Father? Why not, for instance, 'Dad'? Is there a difference between 'Father' and 'Dad'? What does Father learn about humanity by the end? What does Jen learn through Father's sacrifice?

4. Scavengers & settlements

'These people weren't anything like the family in the library; they weren't driven by desperation and fear.' – p.36

Scavengers play a small but important role in the story. How might a post-apocalyptic world be divided up? Who thinks settlements would be the norm? Who thinks there might be bands of scavengers? Why? What do these ideas say about people, about who we are? What would have happened if Father hadn't come back when the scavengers arrived at the settlement? Why was 'Albert' so adamant there should be no weapons? Was it for his own safety? Or the settlements?

5. Charlie

"I mean, if they came back – which they wouldn't, obviously – I just thought it might be nice if..." – p.129

Why does Charlie keep the abandoned house so tidy? What does he want most? Why? Does he really believe the family might come back? When the truth about Father is revealed, why is Charlie so angry with Jen? How would the story be different if it was told from Charlie's point of view? How does Charlie feel by the end of the book? Has he found what he was looking for?

EXTENSION: Creative writing – write a bit of the story from Charlie's perspective – perhaps when Jen arrives, or when he's tidying the house, or even after he learns about Father. How will you convey how he feels? How will it be different to the story Kenny gives us? Think about Charlie's character and how he is different from Jen.

6. Reyna

'But Reyna wasn't listening. Jen saw the wildness in her eyes, more panic than anger, more fear than anything else.' – p.137

What does Reyna want, in the novel? Do we learn why she hates Meks so much? What does Kenny leave to the reader's imagination, and what do we know to have happened? Is Reyna a 'good' character? Discuss how different characters might be viewed 'in context' (check understanding) – what is it important to know about Reyna's past before judging her? Consider, for example: is she trustworthy? What about trusting? Did anyone change their opinion of Reyna by the end of the book?

7. Albert

"Human beings are useful." He turned to her and smiled. "Up to a point." – p.182

Are there any hints that Albert is not who he seems? What are they, if so? Did anyone suspect him before Jen realises who he truly is? Why does he disguise his identity? What is he trying to achieve? Is he a genius? Mad? Delusional? Why does it go so wrong for him?

8. Meks & the Hive

"Meks," said Albert. "Machines originally intended to make the world a better place. But..." – p.81

Are the Meks a completely bad thing? Is the problem the Meks or the Hive? Or both? Or humans? Why? Why does Father not work in the same way? What, if anything, is the author saying about technology and its uses? Where does power come into this? Who should control technology? What is technology for?

EXTENSION: Research – task the group to look at technological advances that have changed the world. Members could ask relatives to tell them about life before, e.g., the internet or smartphones; or groups could look at specific topics – the industrial revolution, aviation, agricultural tools, etc. and report back. What do members think the next big technological advance will be?

9. Tranquillity Lake

'Jen stroked the pages. "I liked where we were. It was nice. I think Tranquillity Lake will be just as nice. Maybe nicer."' – p.43

Where does Jen learn about Tranquillity Lake? What does it represent to her and Father? (Check understanding of 'tranquillity'). Explore ideas of hope, home and future – do any of these relate to how Jen imagines Tranquillity Lake will be? What's the reality when she finally gets there? Do we all need something to aspire to? Something to want?

10. Logic & AI

'Father smiled sadly. "Logic shmogic, Jen."' – p.222

The Hive cannot understand Father because his actions are 'neither logical nor efficient.' What is the difference between humans and machines? Is the ability to be illogical one of the key characteristics of being human? Why? Or why not? Discuss the scenes in which Father and Jen discuss making wishes. Is making a wish a very 'human' thing to do? Why?

How does this book relate to current developments in AI technology? What does anyone think about the rise of AI? Should we be excited? Worried? Both? Could we ever get to a point where machines try to take over?