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Family Reading Guide for "The Bad Ones"

Conversation starters for parents and children

Getting Started

What This Book Is About

"The Bad Ones" is a mysterious and suspenseful story about Nora, whose ex-best friend Becca disappears along with three other people in one night. While the police dismiss it as coincidence, Nora knows something sinister is happening—especially since Becca texted her to come over right before vanishing. As Nora retraces Becca's steps and follows clues left behind, she uncovers the dark history of her small town and a connection to the Goddess Game, a supposedly innocent children's game with dangerous power. Racing against time, Nora must save Becca and herself before it's too late.

Key Themes Your Reader Will Encounter:

- **Complicated friendships:** The complex emotions surrounding friendships that end badly and whether they can be repaired
- **Small-town secrets:** How communities hide dark histories and what happens when someone tries to reveal them
- **Dangerous knowledge:** The risk of investigating things we might not be ready to understand
- **Games and power:** How play can become sinister when it taps into real forces or darker purposes
- **Personal responsibility:** What we owe to people who have hurt us or whom we've hurt
- **The cost of investigation:** Realizing that seeking truth can put you in danger

Content Note for Parents: This book contains mystery/thriller elements including disappearances, potential occult themes, and atmospheric tension. It's best suited for teen readers comfortable with darker, suspenseful content.

Character Connection Questions

About Nora

- Why do you think Nora feels compelled to investigate even though Becca is her ex-friend?
- How does the text Becca sent right before disappearing affect Nora?
- What would you do if someone you weren't close to anymore asked for help?
- How does Nora change as she uncovers more of the mystery?

About Becca and Friendship



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- What do you think happened to end Nora and Becca's friendship?
- Why might Becca have reached out to Nora specifically before disappearing?
- How does investigating someone's disappearance force you to confront your shared history?
- Can friendships that end badly ever be repaired? Should they be?

Big Ideas to Explore

Mystery and Investigation

- What makes Nora believe the four disappearances aren't coincidental?
- How does following clues help Nora understand what happened to Becca?
- What's the difference between curiosity and putting yourself in danger?
- When should someone stop investigating and get help from authorities?

The Goddess Game

- How can a children's game become dangerous?
- What draws people to games that might have occult or supernatural elements?
- Why might the Goddess Game connect to the town's dark history?
- What's the appeal of games that blur reality and fantasy?

Small Towns and Secrets

- Why might small towns be good settings for dark secrets?
- How do communities collectively decide to hide unpleasant truths?
- What happens when someone tries to reveal things the town wants to keep hidden?
- How does knowing dark history change how you view your community?

Fun Conversation Starters

The Mystery Elements

- If you were Nora, what would you investigate first?
- What do you think the four missing people have in common?
- How would you decode the clues Becca left behind?
- What questions would you most want answered?

Games and Folklore

- Do you know any games or playground rhymes with dark origins?
- Have you ever played a game that felt somehow wrong or scary?
- What makes certain games feel more powerful or serious than others?
- How do urban legends and games get passed down?

Personal Choices



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- Would you risk yourself to save an ex-friend? Why or why not?
- How do you know when to stop pursuing something dangerous?
- What would you do differently than Nora?
- When is loyalty to a former friend still important?

Discussion Activities

Mystery Analysis

- Track clues as they're revealed and make predictions
- Create timelines of events leading to the disappearances
- Analyze what makes the mystery compelling and suspenseful
- Discuss red herrings and misdirection in mystery writing

Real-World Connections

- Research real children's games with dark histories (like Ring Around the Rosie)
- Discuss how folklore and urban legends spread in communities
- Explore how social media has changed how teens investigate mysteries
- Talk about when to involve authorities vs. investigating alone

Conversation Tips for Parents

Creating Safe Spaces

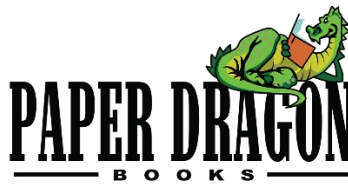
- **Acknowledge the suspenseful nature** - this book is meant to create tension and possibly fear
- **Discuss fiction vs. reality** - supernatural elements are story devices, not real threats
- **Validate discomfort** - it's okay if some parts are scary or unsettling
- **Connect to critical thinking** - use the mystery to discuss logical reasoning and evidence

Encouraging Critical Thinking

- **Ask about choices:** "Do you agree with Nora's decision to investigate alone?"
- **Explore consequences:** "What might happen if Nora tells adults what she's learned?"
- **Discuss red flags:** "When does Nora realize she's in over her head?"
- **Analyze relationships:** "How does the ex-friend dynamic complicate things?"

Making It Personal

- **Discuss friendship evolution:** Share your own experiences with friendships that changed or ended
- **Explore decision-making:** Talk about times you've had to decide whether to help someone
- **Connect to values:** "This reminds me of why we believe in..."



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- **Celebrate healthy choices:** Discuss when characters make smart vs. risky decisions

Questions by Age Group

For Younger Teens (Ages 13-14)

Focus on mystery elements and friendship dynamics:

- What makes this an effective mystery story?
- How does the ex-friend situation make Nora's investigation harder?
- What would you do if you received Becca's text?
- How does the author build suspense and atmosphere?

For Older Teens (Ages 15-18)

Explore deeper themes of complicity, choice, and danger:

- How might Becca have been complicit in her own disappearance?
- What does the story suggest about small-town dynamics and collective secrets?
- How does the Goddess Game function as metaphor and actual danger?
- What are the ethical implications of Nora's investigation?

Handling Complex Themes

Disappearances and Safety

- Acknowledge that disappearances are scary but relatively rare
- Discuss real safety strategies (telling people where you're going, staying with groups)
- Emphasize the fictional nature while validating concern
- Connect to conversations about trusting instincts and getting help

Occult and Supernatural Elements

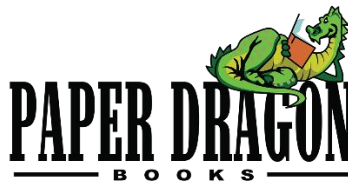
- Discuss how fiction uses supernatural elements to explore real anxieties
- Acknowledge different beliefs about the supernatural
- Focus on how the Goddess Game represents any dangerous activity that seems appealing
- Connect to critical thinking about things that seem too good to be true

Broken Friendships

- Validate that friendships sometimes end and that's painful
- Discuss healthy vs. unhealthy reasons to reconnect with ex-friends
- Explore the difference between loyalty and obligation
- Talk about when to prioritize your own wellbeing vs. helping others

Small-Town Secrets and Authority

- Discuss how communities sometimes collectively hide uncomfortable truths



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- Explore when to trust authority and when to question it
- Talk about the responsibility of individuals to speak truth
- Connect to real-world examples of community cover-ups (age-appropriately)

Activity Ideas

Mystery Writing and Analysis

- Create your own mystery with clues leading to revelation
- Analyze how Albert structures reveals and builds tension
- Write alternative endings or additional chapters
- Design a mystery game based on the story's structure

Research Projects

- Investigate real children's games with dark origins
- Research how urban legends spread and evolve
- Explore psychological aspects of games and ritual
- Study small-town dynamics and community psychology

Creative Projects

- Design your own version of the Goddess Game (rules, origins, purposes)
- Create visual representations of Nora's investigation timeline
- Write diary entries from Becca's perspective leading up to disappearance
- Develop character profiles for all four missing people

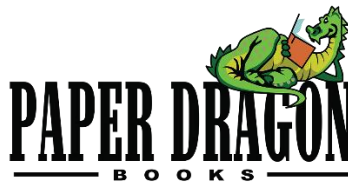
Critical Analysis

- Debate: Was Nora right to investigate alone?
- Discuss: What responsibilities do we have to ex-friends?
- Analyze: How does setting affect mystery and suspense?
- Explore: What makes games powerful or dangerous?

Remember

"The Bad Ones" provides opportunities for discussing friendship complexity, the appeal of mystery, and when investigation becomes dangerous. While the book creates genuine suspense and possibly fear, these emotions in the context of fiction help us process real anxieties about loss, betrayal, and danger.

Use Nora's investigation as a starting point to discuss critical thinking, making safe choices, and understanding when to seek help versus handling things independently. The ex-friend dynamic



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offers rich material for discussing how relationships change and what we owe to people from our past.

Most importantly, let the story's suspenseful elements inspire conversations about discernment—knowing when something feels wrong, trusting instincts, and understanding that some investigations require adult support and involvement. While Nora's solo investigation makes for compelling fiction, real-life mysteries and dangers should involve trusted adults and authorities.

The book's exploration of how ordinary things (games, small towns, friendships) can hide darker elements encourages healthy skepticism and critical thinking about what lies beneath surface appearances—valuable skills for navigating both fiction and reality.