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Family Reading Guide for "I.R.L."

Conversation starters for parents and children

Getting Started

What This Book Is About

"I.R.L." follows sixth-grader Lucy, who moves to rural Alaska eager to escape her bullies and start fresh. When she discovers her new school operates entirely online during winter, she must build friendships through screens—and to her surprise, it works beautifully. Her thirteen classmates are warm, welcoming, and real to her. But when the ice thaws and she finally meets them in person, something is deeply, terrifyingly wrong. "I.R.L." is a suspenseful, thoughtful story about connection, vulnerability, and the unsettling gap between who someone seems to be online and who they actually are.

Key Themes Your Child Will Encounter:

- **Online friendship and its risks:** Lucy's online friendships feel genuinely warm—which makes the revelation that follows all the more unsettling and instructive
- **Vulnerability and trust:** Building relationships from a place of longing to belong makes us more open and more exposed than we realize
- **Digital safety and identity:** The story raises serious questions about who we're really talking to when we build online relationships
- **Resilience after betrayal:** Lucy must navigate what it means when trust is broken in a fundamental way
- **New beginnings and their complications:** Starting fresh is rarely as clean as we hope—old wounds and new dangers have a way of finding us

Tip for Parents: This book handles themes of online safety in a way that feels earned through story rather than delivered as a warning. It is a powerful conversation-starter about digital relationships, but approach it as such—through curiosity and discussion—rather than as a cautionary lecture. The book's suspense and emotional honesty will do more work than any parental warning.

Discussion Questions

About Lucy and Her Connections

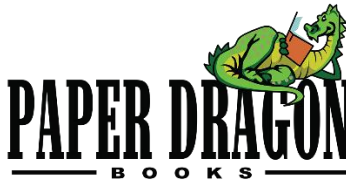
- Why is Lucy so eager to make friends in her new class, even online? What is she hoping for?
- What makes Lucy's online friendships feel real to her? What details does she notice?
- How does her excitement about meeting her classmates in person build throughout the winter?
- What warning signs, if any, appear before the revelation? Would you have noticed them?

About Online Connection and Reality

- What makes an online friendship feel "real"? What's missing that an in-person friendship has?
- Have you ever felt closer to someone online than to people you see every day? What made that possible?
- What would you do if something about an online friend felt "off" in a way you couldn't explain?
- Is it possible to truly know someone you've never met in person? What would "knowing them" even mean?

Fun Conversation Starters

- If your school went entirely online for six months, what would you miss most about in-person school?



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- What's one thing that's easier to say to someone online than in person—and why?
 - If you could ask any question to verify that an online friend is who they say they are, what would it be?
 - Have you ever been surprised—for better or worse—when you met someone in person after knowing them online?
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Discussion Activities

Talking About Online Safety Without Lecturing

- Use the story as a shared reference point: "What do you think Lucy should have done differently?"
- Ask what signals or gut feelings Lucy had—and whether your teen trusts their own instincts in similar situations
- Discuss what information is safe to share with online friends vs. what should stay private
- Talk about the difference between being cautious and being paranoid when it comes to online relationships

Reflecting on New Beginnings

- Discuss: What is Lucy hoping a fresh start will give her that her old situation couldn't?
 - Ask: "Is it possible to truly escape your past by moving somewhere new? What travels with you?"
 - Talk about what your family has learned from starting over—new school, new neighborhood, new chapter
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Conversation Tips for Parents

Navigating Online Relationships With Your Teen

- Ask about your teen's online friendships with genuine curiosity: "Tell me about them—what are they like?"
- Avoid immediate alarm—most online friendships are exactly what they appear to be. Lead with trust and build in critical thinking gently
- Discuss red flags together: someone who avoids video calls, inconsistencies in their story, pressure to keep the friendship secret
- Establish shared guidelines for what information is appropriate to share online

Supporting Resilience After Disappointment

- If the story surfaces personal experiences of online betrayal or bullying, listen first
 - Validate: Lucy's desire for connection is completely understandable, not naive
 - Discuss: What do you do with hope after it's been let down? Does it mean you were wrong to hope?
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Questions by Age Group

For Younger Readers (Ages 11–13)

- Why does Lucy want to move to Alaska?
- Why can't Lucy meet her classmates in person for months?
- How does Lucy feel about her online friendships before she meets everyone in person?
- What happens when Lucy finally arrives at her new school?

For Older Readers (Ages 13–15)



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- What does the book suggest about the difference between connection and genuine knowledge of another person?
- How does Lucy's longing to belong make her more vulnerable than she realizes?
- What responsibility do we have for the version of ourselves we present online?
- What does the book's ending suggest about trust, resilience, and starting over?

Activity Ideas

Writing and Analysis

- Write a journal entry from Lucy's perspective on the day she finally arrives at school in person
- Rewrite one online conversation from the story with what was actually happening on the other end
- Create a "digital safety checklist" based on what the story reveals—what questions should you ask an online friend?
- Write a letter from Lucy to her former bullies at her old school—has her perspective changed?

Research and Discussion

- Research digital literacy and online safety resources for teens—what do experts recommend?
- Explore the psychology of parasocial relationships and online community
- Discuss how remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic affected teen friendships—any parallels to Lucy's experience?
- Look into cyberbullying prevention resources and what healthy online communities look like

"I.R.L." is a story about hope—the specific, vulnerable hope of a kid who's been hurt and still wants to try again. Lucy's mistake isn't that she trusted. Her mistake, if it is one, is that she trusted without asking the questions that might have revealed the truth sooner. Let this book open a conversation about the particular courage of connection in a digital age—and about how to do it more wisely, without losing the willingness to reach out at all.