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Family Reading Guide for "Best of All Worlds"

Conversation starters for parents and teens

Getting Started

What This Book Is About

"Best of All Worlds" follows Xavier, a teenager who wakes up one morning to find that the remote cabin he's sharing with his dad and pregnant stepmother has been transported overnight into a sealed dome—no other humans, limited mysterious assistance, and no answers. What begins as a survival story becomes a years-long saga of family renegotiation, isolation, and the arrival of a second family whose intentions are unclear. Fast-paced and unsettling, this is Opper at his most propulsive—a sci-fi thriller that uses extreme circumstances to force the kind of family honesty that ordinary life makes it easy to avoid.

Key Themes Your Teen Will Encounter:

- **Family dynamics under pressure:** Xavier's blended family tensions, already simmering, become impossible to avoid in the dome—proximity and survival make avoidance impossible
- **Survival and resourcefulness:** The practical challenges of dome life are rendered with detail: food, shelter, the slow building of a sustainable existence
- **Trust and the unknown:** The mysterious assistance, the unanswered questions about who built the dome and why, and the appearance of the second family all test what trust means when information is deliberately withheld
- **Identity and change over time:** Xavier grows up inside the dome—the story spans years, and the person he becomes is shaped entirely by circumstances no one chose
- **Community and conflict:** The second family's arrival raises questions about territory, cooperation, and how communities form between strangers in crisis
- **The ethics of confinement:** Who put them there, and why? The slow revelation of that question gives the novel its moral weight

Note for Parents: This is a science fiction survival story with strong family dynamics at its core. It explores blended family tension, isolation, the psychological effects of confinement, and the ethics of surveillance and control. Parents should be prepared for discussions about family structure, trust in authority, and what we owe to strangers. The pregnant stepmother subplot introduces themes around childbirth and new family formation that younger teens may engage with differently than older readers.

Discussion Questions

About Xavier and the Dome

- What is Xavier's relationship with his father and stepmother like before the dome? How does it change?
- How does Xavier respond to the dome's mysterious "assistance"—with gratitude, suspicion, or something more complicated?
- What does it mean to grow up in a completely contained world? What does Xavier gain—and what does he lose?
- When the second family arrives, what is Xavier's first instinct? Is that instinct right?

About Confinement, Trust, and What We Don't Know



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- What does it do to a person—or a family—to be confined together for years with no choice?
- Who or what is providing the mysterious assistance, and what does their behavior suggest about their intentions?
- What does trust mean when you can't verify who you're trusting or why they're helping you?
- Is it possible to build a good life inside constraints you didn't choose? What would that require?

Conversation Starters

- If you woke up inside a dome tomorrow—with your family, limited resources, and no explanation—what would be your first priority?
- What aspect of ordinary life would you miss most after a year in the dome? After five years?
- If a second group of people appeared in your dome, how would you decide whether to trust them?
- What would you want to know about the people who put you there—and what would you do with the answer?

Discussion Activities

Survival Scenarios and Ethics

- Discuss the classic "lifeboat ethics" question: when resources are scarce, how should they be distributed?
- Ask: "What rules would your family establish in the dome? Who would make them? What would happen if someone broke them?"
- Explore: How do people create social structures when normal institutions disappear?
- Research real-world isolation studies (Antarctic expeditions, space mission simulations) and discuss what they reveal about human behavior

Blended Family and Relationship Dynamics

- Discuss: "What unresolved tensions does your own family have that might be impossible to avoid in a dome?"
- Ask: "What does Xavier learn about his father that he might never have learned under normal circumstances?"
- Talk about the baby: "How does the arrival of a new sibling in an already fraught situation change the family's dynamics?"
- Explore: What does "family" mean when it's built across step-relationships that weren't chosen?

Conversation Tips for Parents

Talking About Trust and Authority

- Use the mysterious "assistance" as a springboard: "When is it wise to accept help without knowing who's offering it or why?"
- Discuss: "Are there situations in real life where we accept help or constraint from institutions without fully understanding their intentions?"
- Ask: "What would it take for you to trust the mysterious source completely? What would it take for you to reject it entirely?"
- Share your own experience navigating situations where you had to trust without full information



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Connecting to Broader Questions

- Discuss: "What does the dome represent beyond just the sci-fi premise—what real-world situations feel like being confined with limited choices?"
 - Explore how Opper uses the survival scenario to ask questions about what family actually requires of us
 - Ask: "Does Xavier's story end with him a better or worse version of who he might have become? How do you know?"
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Questions by Reading Level

Accessible Entry Points (for any reader)

- How does Xavier end up in the dome—and what's the first thing he notices when he wakes up?
- Who provides the mysterious assistance, and what does that assistance include?
- What happens to the family during the years they spend in the dome?
- Who is the second family, and why does their arrival create new tension?

Deeper Analytical Questions

- How does Opper use the dome as a narrative device to force character development that wouldn't be possible in ordinary life?
 - What does the novel suggest about the relationship between constraint and growth—can confinement create something valuable?
 - How does the question of who built the dome and why function as the novel's moral engine?
 - What does Xavier's story say about the relationship between identity and environment—are we who we are, or are we who our circumstances make us?
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Activity Ideas

Creative and Analytical Projects

- Write Xavier's journal entry from his first week in the dome vs. five years in—what has changed?
- Design the dome: What would it look like? What resources would it contain? What would it be missing?
- Write the scene from the second family's perspective when they first arrive—what are they expecting?
- Analytical essay: "How does Opper use a sci-fi premise to examine questions about family, trust, and identity that wouldn't work in realistic fiction?"

Research and Discussion

- Research real cases of long-term isolation—both voluntary (research expeditions) and involuntary—and what they reveal about psychology
- Look into philosophical thought experiments about confined societies (Plato's cave, various dystopian frameworks)
- Explore the ethics of surveillance and control: when, if ever, is it acceptable to confine people "for their own good"?
- Research blended family dynamics in psychology literature—what are the challenges that research identifies?



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"Best of All Worlds" takes a family that was already struggling and puts them somewhere they cannot escape from—and then asks what they do with that. Opper's genius is in understanding that the dome isn't really the story. The dome is the pressure that makes the story possible. Xavier's transformation across years of confinement, the family's slow and imperfect renegotiation of who they are to each other, and the arrival of strangers who force new questions—these are what linger. Use this book to talk about what your own family would do with nowhere to go but toward each other.