



Email: bridget@paperdragonreads.com Phone: (407) 212-7759

Family Reading Guide for "Codebreaker"

Conversation starters for parents and teens

Getting Started

What This Book Is About

"Codebreaker" follows Mia Hayes, a seventeen-year-old whose summer plan—job, college applications, ordinary life—ends when federal agents break into her home and leave her mother dead. Her father is on the run, leaving behind cryptic codes for Mia to follow. With the help of Logan, a charming hacker she meets along the way, Mia races to decipher her father's clues, uncover her family's secrets, and survive the agents tracking her. Part thriller, part puzzle, part coming-of-age, "Codebreaker" is designed to keep readers on the edge of their seats and thinking hard.

Key Themes Your Teen Will Encounter:

- **Family secrets and renegotiation:** Mia's picture of her parents is fundamentally altered by what she discovers—the novel explores what it means when the people who raised you aren't who you thought they were
- **Government surveillance and power:** Federal agents as antagonists raise serious questions about institutional power, privacy, and who controls information
- **Trust and partnership:** Mia must decide whether to trust Logan in circumstances that make trust genuinely dangerous—and their partnership tests both of them
- **Grief and action:** Mia's mother's death drives everything, but the novel channels grief into movement rather than stasis
- **Codes, puzzles, and critical thinking:** The code-breaking structure invites readers to participate actively, rewarding close attention and lateral thinking
- **Agency and autonomy:** Mia acts because she has no other choice—but her choices are genuinely her own, and the novel honors that

Note for Parents: This FTR title involves the violent death of a parent (opening event), federal agents as antagonists, and a teen protagonist operating entirely outside normal adult support structures. The violence is plot-relevant and not gratuitous. The romance with Logan is age-appropriate. Parents should be prepared for conversations about government trust, grief, and what teens do when adult systems fail them. The code-breaking elements are a wonderful hook for teens who enjoy puzzles, logic, and interactive reading.

Discussion Questions

About Mia and Her Situation

- How does Mia's world change in the first pages of the novel—and what does she do immediately, in the moment of crisis?
- What do the codes her father left behind tell us about what he anticipated?
- Why does Mia trust Logan—and is that trust justified? What does she weigh before extending it?
- What version of her parents does Mia discover through the investigation—and how does that change how she understands her own life?

About Secrets, Power, and Truth



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- Why are federal agents the antagonists in this story rather than obvious criminals? What does that choice suggest?
- What does it mean that Mia's father prepared for this situation—that he expected it and planned accordingly?
- What is the relationship between information and power in this story? Who controls what, and why does that matter?
- Is there such a thing as a secret that's worth keeping from the people closest to you? What does this novel suggest?

Conversation Starters

- If you discovered that one of your parents had a secret life, what would be the first question you'd want answered?
- Have you ever decoded something—a message, a pattern, a social situation—that others couldn't see? What did that feel like?
- What would it take for you to trust a stranger in a genuinely dangerous situation?
- If you were being chased and had to leave clues for someone to follow, what kind of clues would you use?

Discussion Activities

Code-Breaking and Puzzle Play

- Try solving simple cipher puzzles together—Caesar cipher, substitution codes, or Morse code
- Research historical code-breaking (Bletchley Park, Navajo Code Talkers, WWII intelligence) and discuss its stakes
- Create a simple coded message for your teen to decode—or challenge them to create one for you
- Discuss: "What does the ability to recognize patterns tell us about how different people think?"

Government, Privacy, and Power

- Discuss: "When is government surveillance justified? What rights should protect individuals from it?"
- Research real cases of government overreach—COINTELPRO, mass surveillance programs—and discuss what they reveal
- Ask: "What does it mean that the most dangerous people in this story work for the government? Is that believable?"
- Explore the concept of whistleblowing—when is it right to expose government secrets?

Conversation Tips for Parents

Talking About Grief and Action

- Mia doesn't stop to process her mother's death—she moves into action immediately. Discuss: "Is that healthy? What does it cost her?"
- Ask: "What do you think Mia feels underneath all the action—and when do you think she'll get to feel it?"
- Share how your family has navigated grief—not to draw direct comparisons, but to model that it's something we talk about



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- Acknowledge: Sometimes people cope with loss by doing something, and that's not wrong—it's human

Trusting Institutions vs. Trusting People

- Discuss: "What institutions do you trust—schools, government, police, media? What would change that trust?"
- Ask: "Mia is on her own because adult systems have failed her. How realistic is that? What does it suggest about those systems?"
- Talk about what critical trust looks like—not blanket suspicion, but the habit of asking who benefits from what we're told

Questions by Reading Level

Accessible Entry Points (for any reader)

- What happens to Mia's family at the beginning of the story?
- What does Mia's father leave behind—and what does it mean?
- Who is Logan, and how does he help Mia?
- What does Mia discover about her family that she didn't know before?

Deeper Analytical Questions

- How does Martel use the code-breaking structure to position the reader as an active participant rather than a passive observer?
- What does the novel suggest about the nature of family secrets—are there secrets that protect, and how do we distinguish those from secrets that betray?
- How does grief function in Mia's story—and what does the novel suggest by channeling it primarily into action?
- What does "Codebreaker" imply about the relationship between truth and power—who controls the narrative, and what does it cost to change it?

Activity Ideas

Writing and Creative Projects

- Write the scene from Mia's father's perspective as he prepares the clues—what is he thinking? What is he afraid of?
- Design a code system: Create a cipher that only your family would be able to crack—based on shared knowledge or inside references
- Write the moment after the story ends: What does Mia do on the first ordinary day after everything is resolved?
- Analytical essay: "How does Martel use the thriller genre to explore questions about institutional power and family loyalty?"

Research and Connection

- Research famous codebreakers—Alan Turing, Elizebeth Friedman, the Navajo Code Talkers—and discuss the stakes of their work



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- Explore the history of US government programs that involved surveillance of citizens—what parallels exist to this novel?
- Research whistleblower cases: Edward Snowden, Daniel Ellsberg, Chelsea Manning—when is leaking government secrets justified?
- Look into the psychology of grief and how individuals respond when they have no time to process loss

"Codebreaker" is a book about the most personal of betrayals: discovering that the people who were supposed to tell you the truth about the world kept something crucial from you. Mia's grief is real, her agency is real, and her determination to find the truth even when every institution is against her is the kind of story that reminds readers what they're capable of. Use this book to talk about what your family would do if everything you thought you knew turned out to be coded—and whether the truth, once found, would be worth the cost of finding it.