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Family Reading Guide for "Dead of Summer"

Conversation starters for parents and teens

Getting Started

What This Book Is About

"Dead of Summer" follows Ollie as he returns to Anchor's Mercy, his small Maine hometown, after a year away while his mother received treatment for an illness caused by a decades-old chemical spill. Just as Ollie tries to reconnect with the friends he cut off, the town's buried history resurfaces in terrifying ways, forcing him to confront both his own isolation and Anchor's Mercy's long-hidden harm.

Key Themes Your Child Will Encounter:

- **Environmental injustice:** The town's chemical spill and its lasting health effects sit at the center of the story
- **Grief and isolation:** Ollie's withdrawal from friends reflects how illness and fear can isolate a family
- **Buried secrets:** The novel explores what happens when a community avoids reckoning with its own history
- **Coming home changed:** Ollie's return forces him to face both his relationships and his hometown's truth

Note for Parents: This book addresses serious illness, environmental contamination, grief, and horror elements with honesty. It will likely generate strong emotional responses, especially for teens who have experienced a family member's serious illness. Approach these conversations with openness.

Discussion Questions

About Ollie

- Why do you think Ollie stopped talking to his friends during his mom's treatment?
- How does Ollie feel about returning to Anchor's Mercy?
- What does Ollie risk by trying to reconnect with his old life?

About Anchor's Mercy

- What happened in the town's past, and how has it affected residents?
- Why do you think the town's history stayed hidden for so long?
- What does the story suggest about the cost of ignoring a community's buried harm?

Conversation Starters

- Have you ever had to reconnect with friends after a hard time pulled you apart?
- What do you think a community owes the people harmed by something in its past?
- Would you want to know if your hometown had a hidden environmental problem?
- What's the difference between a place that feels safe and a place that's actually safe?

Discussion Activities

Engaging With Environmental Justice

- Look up a real case of a community affected by environmental contamination
- Discuss: "What responsibility do companies or governments have when they cause harm like this?"



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- Talk about how long-term health effects can affect families for generations

Talking About Grief and Reconnection

- Discuss healthy ways to reconnect with friends after time apart
- Talk about how fear and grief can cause us to withdraw from people who care about us
- Share a time you or your family had to rebuild a relationship after a difficult period

Conversation Tips for Parents

Talking About Illness, Loss, and Hard Truths

- Lead with listening — ask what your teen already thinks or has experienced regarding serious illness in a family
- Acknowledge that horror elements in the story may reflect very real anxieties about health and safety
- Discuss the value of transparency, even when the truth is uncomfortable

Questions by Reading Level

Accessible Entry Points (for any reader)

- What happened in Anchor's Mercy in the 1960s?
- Why did Ollie's family leave for a year, and why did he stop talking to his friends?
- What starts to go wrong once Ollie's family returns home?

Deeper Analytical Questions

- How does La Sala use horror as a tool to explore real environmental injustice?
- What does the novel suggest about the long-term cost of a community's silence?
- How does Ollie's personal grief mirror the town's collective, unaddressed history?

Activity Ideas

Writing and Advocacy Projects

- Research the Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund program and how it addresses contaminated sites
- Write a persuasive letter as a resident of Anchor's Mercy demanding accountability
- Design a public health awareness campaign for a fictional town confronting a hidden environmental hazard

"Dead of Summer" uses horror and atmosphere to dramatize a very real question: what happens when communities don't face the harm in their own history? Use it to talk with your teen about environmental responsibility, the long reach of grief, and what it takes to come home again.