

GEESE ARE NEVER SWANS

DISCUSSION GUIDE

QUESTIONS

What was your initial reaction to the book *Geese Are Never Swans*? Did it hook you immediately, or did it take some time to get into?

Is the book plot-based or character-driven? Is the book mostly about the characters or all about the plot?

How does the author, Eva Clark, reveal the tragic death of Danny in the beginning of the book?

How is the setting a significant part of the story? What makes the setting important? How does the setting affect the events in the story?

What are the major themes in *Geese Are Never Swans*? Discuss the following:

- PRESSURE OF YOUTH SPORTS
- FAMILY DYNAMIC
- SUICIDE / MENTAL ILLNESS
- BRAVADO
- SECRETS
- HUMAN NEEDS
- WINNING VS. HAPPINESS

Why do you think the author uses profanity?

Who is telling the story?

How believable is Gus? Do you feel like you got the “real” story? Was his telling of events credible, reliable, or distorted at times?

Discuss Gus’s relationship with Winter.

How does Gus show his anger? Describe things he does, says, thinks, and feels.

How does Gus’s mental state contribute to his perspective of life?

Did you ever feel angry at Gus in the story? Explain.

Gus likes the darkness. How does his mood affect the tone of the book? How does this change? Find examples of “darkness” in the story.

Explain Gus’s fascination with being in the water and how it connects him to his father.

How do the characters change throughout the story? How did your opinion of them change? Does anyone remain the same? Include Gus, Coach Marks, Gus’s mom, Darien, and Winter.

What character changes are positive? Negative? Were you waiting for changes that never materialized in the characters?

How does the structure of the book affect the story? Gus alternates in the present and past. How does this enhance meaning and tone?

What does “Mink” represent?

What is the “black swan theory” and what significance does it have in the story?

How did you feel about the ending? What did you like, what did you not like, and what do you wish had been different?

Books have the power to change lives and influence people. *Geese Are Never Swans* is a “heavy” book addressing some difficult themes and topics on mental health. How did this book inspire, empower, enrage, or educate you?

Did the book change your opinion or perspective about depression among young athletes? Do you feel different now than you did before you read it?

If the book were being adapted into a movie, who would you want to play each character?

What songs does this book make you think of?

If you got the chance to ask Eva Clark, the author, one question, what would it be?

Which character in the book would you most like to meet? What would you tell them, ask them?

Do you think that Gus’s mom hates him? How have her decisions impacted her relationship with Gus?

What do you think of the book’s title? How does it relate to the book’s contents? What other title might you choose?

If you could hear this same story from another character’s point of view, who would you choose? Why? How would the story be different?

Discussing Trauma

What is a crisis? Trauma?

How do traumatic events affect people differently depending on the relationship and circumstances?

What traumatic events touch the lives of characters in the story?

How do these events alter the lives of individuals?

- FATHER DIES IN A CAR CRASH
- DARIEN USES DRUGS AND LEAVES WINTER WITH MOM
- DANNY DIES BY SUICIDE
- GUS HAS A NERVOUS BREAKDOWN

What impact does group therapy have on Gus? Discuss the personal changes and growth throughout the book.

ACTIVITIES

Role-Playing

In *Geese Are Never Swans* there were many occasions where characters found themselves in situations that could have been handled differently.

Write down a situation from the book that you found bothersome. Describe who was involved, what was happening at the time, and how the character or characters could have had better outcomes had they made better choices.

Choose a member of your group to role-play the scene.

After the role-play is complete, process the role-play with the group and discuss the behaviors that were practiced, the consequences of the chosen behaviors, and other possible solutions. Talk about any feelings that came up for participants and spectators while acting out the role-play.

Understanding Values

What are values?

When individuals have difficulty maintaining relationships, it is often due to a conflict with values. Values are deeply held convictions that guide behaviors and decisions. Personal values are formed very early in our lives and are the key components of a life of integrity. When honoring values, a person feels balanced and happy, in tune and true to themselves.

Discuss how Gus, Mom, Coach, and Darien are out of alignment with their personal values and how this propels the plot.

What are the values of characters from the book?

How do the characters value relationships?

What changes as the story progresses?

What self-improvements are made? What is the driving force of change?

Exploring Relationships

- Map out the relationships in your life.
- Make three columns: one for family, one for friends, and one for a coach or teacher.
- Write out your values and goals for each group.
- Think about your core values and how they intersect into your relationships.
- How did it feel to write down your values?
- Do you have any friends or family members who have similar values?
- What is your best relationship?
- What makes this a good relationship?
- What do you value most about the person and/or relationship?
- What is your hardest or most difficult relationship?
- What about this person or relationship conflicts with your values?
- How have you worked through this relationship?
- What makes you stay in the relationship?

Understanding Depression

Depression is an illness that involves the body, mood, and thoughts. It affects the way a person eats and sleeps, the way they feel about themselves, and the way that they think about things.¹ This clinically diagnosable mood disorder also affects everyone around the person experiencing the symptoms of depression. Depression is a major theme in *Geese Are Never Swans*.

Who in the story is experiencing depression?

What are the signs?

What do the characters do, say, and think to reveal this?

How does depression affect the characters in the story?

Discuss the symptoms of depression from the story.

Compare them with the clinical symptoms below.

Symptoms of Depression

- Feeling sad most of the time
- Not enjoying things you used to enjoy
- Feeling restless, agitated, irritable, and/or easily annoyed
- Feeling tired
- Fatigue or slowing of body movements
- Feeling worthless and having excessive guilt
- Sleep disturbances
- Difficulty returning to sleep after waking in the middle of the night or early in the morning
- Impaired thinking or concentration
- Low self-esteem / Feeling hopeless or helpless
- Thoughts of suicide
- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Having trouble at work or school

What are your views or thoughts on depression?

How do you look at people who are depressed?

Why is it important to take others' problems seriously, even if they don't seem important to you?

What are some things you can do to make yourself feel better when you are feeling down?

Who could you talk to if you are feeling depressed?

Can you have depressive feelings at different times in your life?

What misconceptions about depression/suicide did you learn about from Gus and Danny? Coach Marks?

Identify times or situations in your own life when you've felt down. How do you deal with low moods?

Is depression something you can just "get over"?

Who in the story is a support system for others? Explain.

- LAINEY
- MARCO
- COACH MARKS
- SWIM TEAMMATES

Sometimes stress can be a good thing. How does stress act as a positive force for Gus?

How does Gus alleviate stress?

Who Said It?

Identify who makes the below statements in *Geese Are Never Swans* and explain why you think so.

NEVER STOP TO HELP ANYONE WHO'S DROWNING; OTHERWISE NO ONE WILL EVER BOTHER LEARNING TO SWIM.

THIS HOUSE IS A BLUSTERING TORNADO OF DAMAGE AND DYSFUNCTION.

I WANT **HIM** TO BE COMPARED TO **ME**.

I WANT TO SEE **HOW** YOU WORK, NOT WHAT YOU CAN DO.

I'M NOT FIGHTING THE POOL. I'M PART OF IT.

SOMETIMES YOU NEED OTHER PEOPLE AND THERE'S NO WEAKNESS IN THAT.

FORGIVENESS ISN'T A LIGHT SWITCH OR A MAGIC WAND. IT'S WORK.

THIS IS ABOUT PACING AND PLANNING. SWIMMING WITH YOUR BRAIN.

HE CHOSE TO DIE RATHER THAN LIVE WITH HIS FAILURE.

ON THE DAY WE MET I TOLD YOU HOW MUCH I ADMIRERD YOUR BROTHER.
NOW I CAN ADD YOU TO THE LIST OF ASSHOLES I LOOK UP TO.

WHETHER GOOSE OR SWAN, I HAVE WINGS. AND I'LL FLY.

Write About It

If you could add a chapter in the book, what would it be?

Think About It

What are some of the things in your life that you find stressful?

How do stress and depression affect teenagers? (drugs, alcohol, promiscuity)

How can your friends and family help you when you are under a lot of stress?

How can coaches help young athletes deal with the stress of competition?

How would you prioritize your responsibilities to decide what to cut back on?

What is most important to you?

What is less important?

What did you learn about how depression feels and looks from reading *Geese Are Never Swans*?

How did this book make you feel?

Who can you go to for help if you think you are depressed?

What are the warning signs for suicide?

What are the symptoms of depression?

What could you do to help a friend who was feeling depressed?

What would you do if you were worried about yourself?

Where would you go for help?

What would you do if you thought a friend was thinking about suicide?

How would you approach parents or counselors with your concerns and/or problems?

Which character or issue do you most identify with personally from the book?

What impacted you the most about this book?

If someone asked you what *Geese Are Never Swans* was about, what would you say?

RESOURCES

Following is a list of organizations and resources available to support the mental well-being of student athletes:

The Hidden Opponent

Raising awareness for student-athlete mental health, the Hidden Opponent empowers athletes to face the hidden opponent together as a community.

[instagram.com/thehiddenopponent/](https://www.instagram.com/thehiddenopponent/)

Michael Phelps Foundation

Focused on promoting water safety, healthy living (mental and physical), and the pursuit of dreams, especially for children.

[michaelphelpsfoundation.org](https://www.michaelphelpsfoundation.org)