

Black Rabbit Summer by Kevin Brooks

- 1) *'The summer of this story started for me on a hot Thursday night at the end of July...'* In what way is this background detail relevant to the rest of the story? How does the baking hot summer impact upon the action as it unravels? Think about references to the heat of the summer throughout the book. Would it be the same story if it had taken place in the middle of winter? Or if the summer had been a total wash-out?
- 2) The story begins with a simple phone call between Pete and Nicole. What do you make of Nicole from that first phone call? Are you suspicious of her intentions? What kind of person do you think Nicole is? Why does he agree so readily to see her? If you had been in Pete's position, how would you have reacted to her call out of the blue?
- 3) Pete talks about 'connections' and how the gang – Nicole, Paul, Eric, Raymond and Pete – relate to each other: *'But that was then and things were different then...things gradually changed'*. How are these 'connections' different from friendships? Do you have friendships that have changed or evolved over the years? Is it inevitable that some friends move on, and others remain?
- 4) There's one friendship in Pete's life that hasn't changed. Which one is it? How does this friendship impact upon the rest of the story? How does Pete feel about this particular friendship? And how does it affect the other 'connections' in his life?
- 5) Raymond has an unusual relationship with Black Rabbit. Is this something that, as his friend, Pete should be concerned about? If one of your friends told you that his pet rabbit spoke to him, how would you react? Pete describes Raymond as *'not quite right'* (p89). What does he mean by this? How does this explain the special bond between the two friends?
- 6) Think of the different locations in the book: the old den in Back Lane, the alleys, the houses, and the fairground. Think about how these different environments compare. How does the author use language to change the mood and the atmosphere in each location? How does this influence the overall mood of the novel? Some of the key events in the story take place at the fairground. How does the author convey the noise, the colour and the confusion of the fairground?
- 7) How much of what happens on the night of Raymond's disappearance is influenced by drink and drugs? If the evening hadn't started in the old den, if the gang had met up at the fairground, for example, do you think the outcome would have been the same? What was it that took place in the den that caused the flash point? Does the author make any judgements about what goes on in the den? Why or why not? Do the events that take place seem realistic? Why is this so important to the story?
- 8) Black Rabbit Summer reads like a compulsive crime novel. What is it that draws us into the drama of the story? What are the vital elements needed to keep us reading? What role does Pete Boland have to play in this story? Is it just a coincidence that his father is a detective? Is he a sympathetic character? If he isn't, would the novel be quite as compelling?
- 9) On the night at the fairground, both Raymond and Stella end up missing. How differently are these two events handled by the police? How does Pete feel about this and the way in which the two disappearances are publicised? In what way does this reflect current attitudes towards 'celebrities' and media fascination with 'celebrity' culture?
- 10) How did you react to the ending of the book? Were you surprised or shocked by the revelations of what really happened to Stella? What do you think became of Raymond? Think about the various possibilities and talk them through. Why do you think Kevin Brooks decided not to reveal Raymond's fate? Do you think Raymond's disappearance is connected to the fate of Black Rabbit? Or is it just a bizarre coincidence?

Airman by Eoin Colfer

1) 'Conor Broekhart was born to fly, or more accurately he was born flying.' Why is it relevant to the story where Conor was born? How does this set the mood and tone for the rest of the book? What does this tell us about Conor and the era he was born?

2) The story centres around the Saltees, islands off the coast of Wexford in Ireland. Are the islands real or imagined? How can you be sure? Does it matter to the story? Why is the location of these islands central to the plot? What does Conor mean when at the end of the book he says, 'Little Saltee will always be with me. It has marked my body and mind,'?

3) As a nine-year-old, Conor heroically saves Princess Isabella. Is Conor's rescue brave, or just a little crazy? What does this episode tell us about the young Conor? Does he change much as he gets older? Does this episode give any hints about the future?

4) Eoin Colfer has said of **Airman**, "I wanted it to read like the kind of book you found on your grandfather's shelf. You just take it down, dust it off and get straight into the story." What does he mean by that? Has he succeeded? Although it's set in the fictional past, does **Airman** feel like an old-fashioned book? What has the author done to bring the story up to date and make it relevant for a modern audience?

5) The prologue to **Airman** begins in 1878, but most of the action takes place in the late 19th century. Why is it important to the plot that the story has a proper historical context? Would it have worked if it had been set 20 years earlier, or 20 years later?

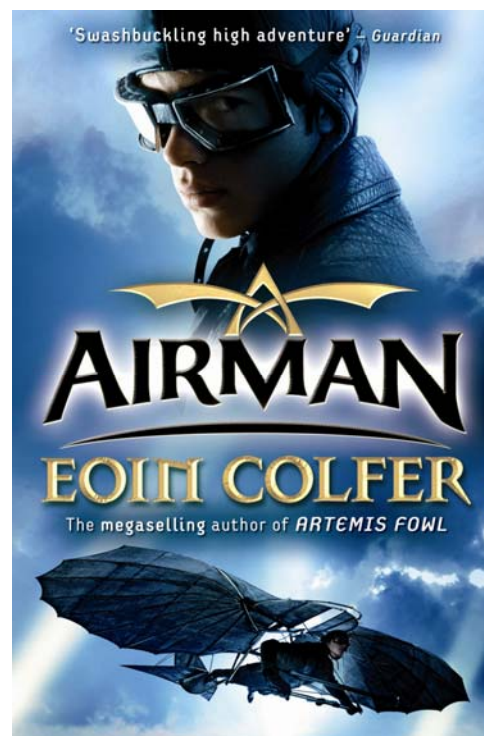
6) How carefully has the author researched the history of flight? How can you tell? Is it important to the story that the technical details are spot on?

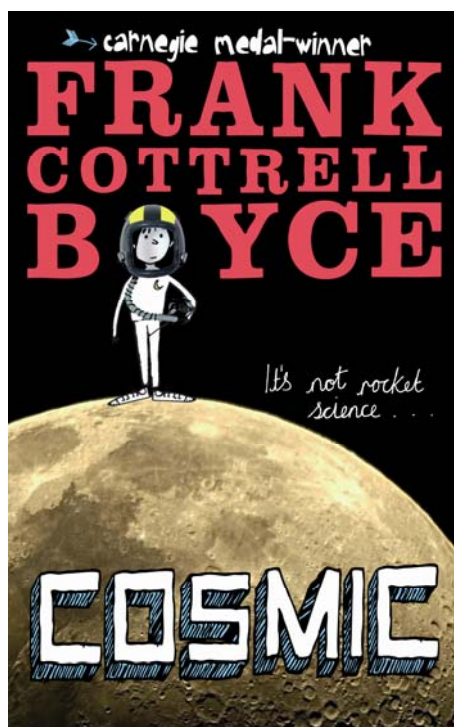
7) One of Conor's greatest qualities is his instinct for survival. Would you have found the necessary strength to survive the trials that Conor faced? Linus also implores Conor to use his 'hatred of him [Bonvilain] to awaken the killer instinct?' In what way does this help Conor? In his fight with Otto Malarkey, what do we learn about Conor? Why is this a crucial lesson for our hero?

8) One of the themes of the story is friendship and collaboration. Would Conor achieve his daring escape without the help of Linus Wynter? In what ways does Linus assist Conor? And who else helps him along the way?

9) What does Linus mean when he tells Conor at the end of the book 'Other men look up and down, left and right. But men like us are different. We are visionaries.' Who is he quoting and why is it appropriate? Is this also true of other great men and women throughout history? What qualities does it take to make a visionary who can change the world?

10) How does Conor Broekhart – 'Airman' – compare with a modern day superhero like Batman or Superman? Is he more 'real' than these comic book creations? Do we need heroes in our lives? And if we do, why do we need them? If you could achieve one moment of greatness in your life, what would it be, and why? Who would you choose to help you achieve your moment of glory?





Cosmic by Frank Cottrell Boyce

- 1) In what way is Liam Digby an unusual 13-year-old? How does he cope with these differences that set him apart? How do you think you would cope if you were Liam?
- 2) 'Liam, you've got to stop growing so fast. I'm not ready to lose my little boy yet,' (p18). Why does Liam's mother not want him to grow up? Is it common for parents to feel like this about their children?
- 3) Why does Liam not want to go into any details when his mother asks him how his first day at Waterloo High went? How did it make you feel to read about Mrs Sass's mistake? What would you have done if you had been in Liam's position?
- 4) Why is World of Warcraft so important to Liam? What is it about the game that appeals to him? Have you ever played World of Warcraft (or do you know someone who plays it regularly)? Can you understand how Liam feels about the other members of his guild?
- 5) Why is Liam fascinated by far-flung places? If you could go travel to anywhere in the world, where would you choose to go, and why? How would you feel about a trip to the moon?
- 6) When Liam is asked what he likes about theme parks he says 'the Crispy New World feeling you get after you've been on a thrill ride'. What does he mean by this? Have you ever been to a theme park and experienced that same feeling? Do you enjoy thrill rides? If not, why not?
- 7) What kind of an actor is Liam? Why is this important to the plot? When Liam pretends to be an adult and wins a trip to Draxworld, is he just acting, or is he being dishonest? What's the difference?
- 8) Dr Drax tells the children 'You will be the first children in space.' How do you think it would feel to be told this? Would you have any reservations? What are the advantages and disadvantages for the children (and for Liam in particular)?
- 9) What does Liam learn about parents by pretending to be Florida's father at Draxworld? And what does he learn about being a kid? How useful does he find the book *Talk to Your Teen*? How do you think Liam compares to the other fathers on the space programme?
- 10) In what way have the characters changed by the end of the story? How have they benefitted from their experience in outer space? Earlier in the book, Liam tells the children, 'You're not like kids at all. You're like unusually small teachers.' Is this still true? If you could leave one message on the moon's surface for future generations, what would it be?

Bog Child by Siobhan Dowd

1) **Bog Child** is set in Ireland in 1981. Why is the political background relevant to the story? Why does the author write a note at the end of the book setting the book in historical perspective? At the end of the book, the author stresses the point that the hunger strikers portrayed in **Bog Child** are fictional characters. Why didn't she write about real hunger strikers? How would this have altered the story?

2) Fergus is looking after his brother Joe's watch while he's in prison. What is the significance of the watch? Why has Joe entrusted it to Fergus? Does Fergus miss his brother? How does Joe's absence affect the people around him, his family in particular? What effect does Joe's hunger strike have on them?

3) When Fergus first finds the body of the bog child, he fears she may be 'the victim of an execution, the child of a traitor'. What does this tell you about Fergus and his state of mind? Does his uncle share Fergus view? Does Fergus make an immediate connection with the bog child? How does that happen?

4) Why is running so important to Fergus? How does it make him feel? Is it just about getting his body fit, or is there another dimension to his running? Does it boost him psychologically, would you say? Can you understand how physical activity can have this sort of affect on a person? Do you respond to exercise in the same way?

5) What is Fergus' reaction when he first meets Michael Rafter's at the swimming pool? Is he scared of him? Does Fergus want to do 'a bit of courtering to and fro over the border'? Why is he reluctant to get involved? Why does Fergus finally agree? If you were in Fergus's position, would you do it?

6) What is the significance of Fergus' friendship with Owain? What do they have in common? And what sets them both apart? Felicity told Fergus that 'the bog claimed a life for a life'. Does Owain's death fulfil this prophecy? Is he making amends for Mel's killing? Or for Joe's salvation?

7) Why does Fergus compose a letter to Margaret Thatcher? What is he trying to achieve? How persuasive is Fergus' letter? Would you have relented if you had read the letter? Why doesn't Fergus send his letter? Why does he throw it in the bin?

8) How does Mel connect with Fergus, despite the fact she died thousands of years before he was born? Why does he refer to Mel as 'the child time forgot'? Why does this take on a new meaning when he discovers the truth about Mel? Does she only exist in Fergus' 'subconscious' as he calls it? Or has she become a real person to him? How does it mirror his relationship with Cora?

9) Why does it never occur to Fergus to open the packets he's asked to deliver? Why does he only think of it when he's delivering his final packet? Is he disappointed it's not Semtex or some kind of explosive? Or is he relieved? What did you think was in the packets?

10) 'The summer of the bog child was over...but the old Fergus of that time would never return.' Think about all the different things that have happened to Fergus over the summer. In what ways has he altered? Have they changed him for the better? Or for the worse? Did his Uncle Tally let him down? Did Fergus know all along what his uncle was involved in? Fergus is leaving to study medicine. But do you think he'll ever return?



Ostrich Boys by Keith Gray

1) Why do Kenny, Sim and Blake decide to steal Ross's ashes and undertake a 260 mile trip? What is their motivation? Do you think they were right to do it? If you were in their shoes, what would you have done?

2) To what extent are Mr Fowler, Sean Munro and Nina to blame for Ross's death? Is it really their fault? Kenny describes what they do to Mr Fowler as '*payback...revenge, pure and simple*'. What are they avenging and why? Have you ever had a teacher like Mr Fowler? Does he deserve it? What's the significance of the wording that Sim sprays on the history teacher's door?

3) The story is narrated by Blake. How does he fit into the gang of four? What about the others? What are their roles? How do the group dynamics change through the story? Who would you describe as the leader of the gang? Why are gangs so important when you're growing up? If you were part of this gang, who would you be and why? What's the significance of the title? Why is it so appropriate to the story?

4) What do we find out about Ross as the story unwinds? What kind of a person was he? We know Ross wrote adventure stories himself and based the characters on his friends. Is this story the sort of adventure that Ross might have written for his mates? At the end of the book Kenny says of Ross, '*We've got the best story ever. But he missed out. He's never going to be able to tell it.*' Is he right? Or in some way is Ostrich Boys really Ross's last story?

5) Why do the boys all agree to turn their mobile phones off as they set off on their journey? Why is this crucial to the story? What else does it say about the boys and their adventure? What are the consequences of Blake turning his phone back on?

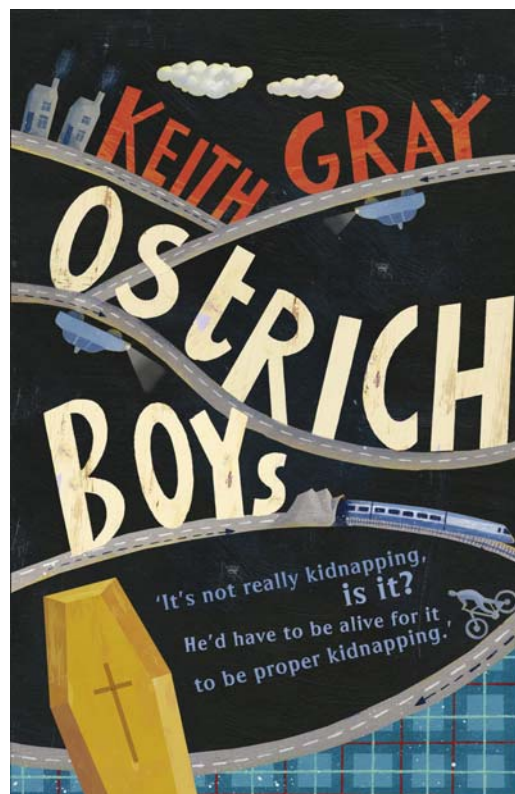
6) This type of tale is often called a 'road story', involving a journey that will play a significant part in the lives of those taking part. In what way does this journey affect the three boys who undertake it? What are the highs and the lows for them? What about you, the reader? Which episodes did you enjoy most?

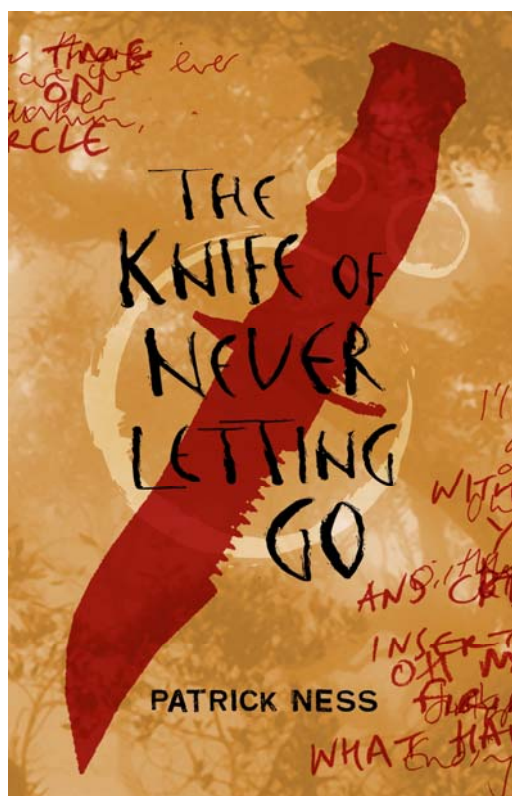
7) '*Here I was, doing it anyway. Doing it with my friends.*' To what extent is the story about friendship and the lengths to which friends will go to support each other? Would you go as far as Blake, Kenny and Sim if you lost a friend? How does their friendship alter throughout the course of the book? Are they still friends by the end of the story?

8) Are you shocked by the revelations concerning Nina and Blake? Is Sim right to punch Blake for what he did? Can you understand his anger? Sim tells Blake he's undertaken the trip out of 'guilt' and not through friendship? Is this true? Was Blake really such a good friend to Ross?

9) Considering the heavy subject matter of **Ostrich Boys**, it has some genuinely funny moments. Why has the author done this? What does the humour say about the story and about the characters? Do you think this is true to life? Is it right to carry on laughing after a 15-year-old has committed suicide?

10) How did Blake initially take the news of Ross's possible suicide? How does this compare to his reaction to the news at the end of the book that Ross did actually take his own life? Does it change the way you feel about the boys' journey? Why do you think Ross killed himself?





The Knife of Never Letting Go by Patrick Ness

- 1) *'The first thing you find out when yer dog learns to talk is that dogs don't got nothing much to say. About anything.'* What does the opening of the novel tell you about the narrator and the kind of world he lives in? How does it compare to our own world? How important is it that the author establishes the differences between this fictional place and our world quickly to the reader?
- 2) How does Todd feel about the prospect of becoming a man when he turns 13 in one month's time? What kind of impact will this birthday have on him? How would you feel about becoming an adult on your 13th birthday? At what age do you think children are ready to be accepted by society as adults? When they're old enough to vote? To marry? To leave home?
- 3) *'There's no such thing as silence. Not here, not nowhere. Not when yer asleep, not when yer by yerself, never.'* What is the Noise that Todd talks about? What is it caused by? How does the author convey the power and the effect of the Noise on the page? How would you cope in a world dominated by Noise? Can you imagine what it would be like? Think about all the sounds in your life that you hear every day. Isn't this a kind of Noise too? Are there any sounds in your life that you can't stand?
- 4) In a world dominated by men, what kind of effect does it have on the reader when we finally encounter a girl? What kind of girl is Viola? In what way does she differ from Todd?
- 5) Think of the way the novel is written and the kind of language used by the author. Why does he use unusual and unorthodox spelling for certain words (think of 'reckernize' and 'suspishun' for example)? In what way does this impact upon the storytelling? How would it change the way the book is written if Todd's words were spelled in the usual way?
- 6) What is the relevance of the knife in the book? Why is it of such importance to Todd? There's much in the media about knives and gang culture, yet it is an adult who gives Todd his knife in this book. Is this a responsible thing to do? Why do some youths carry knives in our society? In what way is it different from Todd carrying a knife? *'The knife is alive,'* (p341). What does Todd mean by this?
- 7) Towards the end of the book, we discover all about the culture of secrets and lies that have circulated in Prentisstown. Did the revelations of what had been going on in Prentisstown shock or surprise you? How would you have reacted if you had been in Todd's position? Were Ben and Cillian right to do what they did? Was it an act of bravery, or one of cowardice?
- 8) Although he's just a dog, Manchee is a vital part of Todd's life. Why is the bond between the two so close? What kind of qualities does Manchee have? How do we feel about what happens to him at the hands of Aaron? Did Todd make the right choice by leaving Manchee? What else could he have done? What would you have done in his position?
- 9) *'She hurts. And I know all this...I can read her Noise even though she ain't got on,'* (p420). What does Todd mean when he says this about Viola? What level of understanding have he and Viola reached? What do they have in common? What does this tell us about their relationship, and the way in which it has changed? How does it compare with the way Todd and Viola related to each other initially?
- 10) **The Knife of Never Letting Go** is the first book in a trilogy, **Chaos Walking**. How do you think the story might develop in the next book? Where do you think the action will take place? What would you like to see happen? Do you think we'll find out what happened to Ben?

Creatures of the Night by Kate Thompson

1) Why does Bobby's ma move her family from Dublin to Ennis? Is she right to make the move? How does Bobby feel about leaving Dublin? How would you feel if you were uprooted from where you live and all your friends? Would you want to go?

2) What kind of a boy is Bobby? He smokes and drinks, steals and takes drugs. Does some of Bobby's behaviour shock or surprise you? Why does he do the things he does? Has he had many advantages in life? Until he comes to Ennis, does he have any good male role models? How does that change?

3) Bobby talks about 'working the streets', stealing and mugging with his mates. Why hasn't Bobby been punished for his crimes yet when he has been caught? Is it just luck or are there other factors? Do you think he should be locked up for some of the things he does? Or does he need something else?

4) What is Bobby's relationship with his old friends like? Do Beetle, Fluke and Mick miss him as much as he misses them? Compare it with Bobby's relationship with Colman? How is it different? In what ways are they alike? Would you say Bobby and Colman are good friends?

5) *'I don't think either of us had ever been trusted by anyone before.'* Do you think PJ's trust in Bobby and his mother misplaced? Do they let him down? And if they do, how did they do it? Why has no one trusted them previously? And do they trust each other? Would you trust Bobby and his ma if you were in PJ's position?

6) Bobby doesn't know who his father is. How has this affected him and his relationship with his mother? How does he get on with his younger brother Dennis? Does it matter to Bobby that Dennis knows who his father is, but Bobby doesn't? Do you think Bobby's ma should tell him who his father is?

7) What kind of a parent is Bobby's mother? Is she trying to do right by her sons? Towards the end of the book, Bobby works out that his mother was only 14 – the same age that he is now – when she had him. How does he take this news? Does it change the way you feel about Bobby? Is 14 too young to become a parent?

8) Although **Creatures of the Night** is a book about growing up in a tough urban landscape, it's also a book that has its roots in Irish folklore. How do these two parts of the story link up? What, or who, connects the two? Who is the little old woman that Dennis sees? Is she imaginary? Or is it really just a badger that visits the house in the night? Was Peggy and Joe's child stolen away by the fairies and a changeling left in its place?

9) Would you have slept in the house like Bobby and his family after it emerges that Lars, the previous tenant, had been murdered? What do you think happened in the house? Who murdered Lars? And why? To what extent is *Creature of the Night* a murder mystery? Is it one that is ever solved?

10) The story finishes with an epilogue that jumps ahead to when Dennis is aged fourteen. Why does that 'ring all kinds of bells' for Bobby? Why does Bobby still have the torque wrench he bought that summer? And why should Dennis remember it so vividly? What do we learn about Bobby's life in the intervening years? How have the 'wings wards and dormitories' affected him? Has his life changed now for Bobby? How important is it to Bobby that 'PJ thinks the world of me, no matter how many times I let him down'?

