



middle grade at heart
discussions & resources for
teachers, parents, and kids

JUST UNDER THE CLOUDS Discussion Guide

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What's it about?

Always think in threes and you'll never fall, Cora's father told her when she was a little girl. Two feet, one hand. Two hands, one foot. That was all Cora needed to know to climb the trees of Brooklyn.

But now Cora is a middle schooler, a big sister, and homeless. Her mother is trying to hold the family together after her father's death, and Cora must look after her sister, Adare, who's just *different*, their mother insists. Quick to smile, Adare hates wearing shoes, rarely speaks, and appears untroubled by the question Cora can't help but ask: How will she find a place to call home?

After their room at the shelter is ransacked, Cora's mother looks to an old friend for help, and Cora finally finds what she has been looking for: *Ailanthus altissima*, the "tree of heaven," which can grow in even the worst conditions. It sets her on a path to discover a deeper truth about where she really belongs.

Just Under the Clouds will take root in your heart and blossom long after you've turned the last page.



Author Interview

1. Where did the idea for *Just Under the Clouds* initially come from?

I was wandering around Prospect Park in Brooklyn when I saw a group of kids climbing a giant oak tree. The image struck me and I had the spark of an idea to write about a girl, a city kid, who loved to climb trees and was looking for the tallest tree in New York City.

At the same time, I was a new mother and my identity was shifting into a new role. I felt unmoored, like I wasn't "at home" in my own skin. I started to think about the meaning of "home" and this girl climbing and searching the city. I realized I wasn't

writing about a girl searching for a tree, I was writing about a girl searching for a place to call home.

2. *Just Under the Clouds* is a book about a girl whose family is, as she puts it, "technically homeless," and it certainly explores the concept of what it means to feel at home...but it explores many other rich concepts, too. In your mind, what is Cora's story about at its core, and what ideas or questions do you hope it encourages readers to think about?

Cora's story is about searching for a deeper connection to the world. She's a person who looks for patterns and connections in all the plants and trees growing around her, to see where she might belong. Cora is a good daughter, a loyal sister, and a great friend, but she finds herself, for the first time, disagreeing with her mother's choices, and, as she seeks a place to set down her roots, she comes to understand that she may have overlooked some of the people in her life.

I hope that *Just Under the Clouds* encourages readers to look at their own worlds, the sidewalks and streets, the trees and plants, the people and places they see every day, and look at how they fit into a larger web of connection.

3. Cora's passion for trees and climbing is so well developed, and the book's Brooklyn setting is so vivid. We especially loved the depiction of the polluted but still beautiful Gowanus Canal and the houseboats there. What kind of research did you do to bring Cora's interest in trees and all of the details of the setting to life?

Thank you! I lived in Brooklyn for many years, so the setting is based entirely on the sidewalks I walked along every day. I knew a stray charcoal cat and a Miss Li, and I can point to every tree that Cora climbs or spots.

I did participate in the 2015 [Trees Count!](#) which is a census of all the street trees in New York City. So I was able to identify, measure, and track trees on many streets in my

neighborhood. I canoed on the very polluted Gowanus Canal with the [Gowanus Dredgers Canoe Club](#) which promotes awareness of the environmental issues facing the canal. And I talked to [The Gowanus Canal Conservancy](#) about the canal's plant life. I also worked at a school for children with special needs, which inspired the relationship between Cora and her sister, Adare.

4. *Just Under the Clouds* includes so many wonderful, complex characters. Other than your main character, Cora, which character was your favorite to write and why?

I love Adare. She is observant and kind. She loves people and animals. And she's wonderfully stubborn. It's funny because dialogue is one of my favorite things to write but Adare does not speak much at all in the book. Her interactions are very tactile and emotional. I loved exploring different ways for her to interact with the world and the rest of the characters.

5. Cora's mom is Mexican American and from Texas, and her dad was from Ireland. How did you decide on these aspects of her parents' backgrounds, and in what ways are their cultures important to their characters and/or the story?

Having lived in Brooklyn for many years, it was very important for me to reflect its diversity. Few children who live there are just one race or religion, and they celebrate a wide range of cultures from their parents and grandparents. When I discovered I was writing about a girl who did not have a permanent home, I knew I was tackling a sensitive topic and I did not want this particular face of homelessness to be one race, religion, or culture. For me, Mexican American and Irish best reflected the demographic in South Brooklyn where the book takes place and felt most authentic.

New York City is unique in that very few adults who live there were born there. It is a city of migrants. Cora's parents hail from different places, but she, herself, has roots in this city. I loved exploring the idea that a feeling of home can shift throughout our lives depending on where we are and who we are with.

6. Lots of writers face rejection on their way to success. Did you face rejections on the way to success for *Just Under the Clouds* or other books you worked on? What tips or advice do you have for aspiring writers?

It's funny because the very first thing I wrote and mailed off was accepted: a poem I wrote when I was ten years old, published in the *Pennysaver* (it was about the sun). Nothing I've written since has been that simple!

For years I wrote short stories rejected by every magazine and journal in the world, it seemed. I also wrote some novels that never found representation and I wrote and rewrote a novel that never sold. After that, my first agent left the business and I found myself without an advocate for my work. Unlike a lot of my other manuscripts, which I often submitted aggressively and widely, I was a bit fearful and guarded with *Just Under the Clouds*. I submitted it to very few agents and, even then, it went through three substantial rewrites before anyone was interested. From there, however, it ended up selling very quickly.

My advice to aspiring writers is to remember that the work and your voice matter. Many of us, particularly women, have to fit writing into the tiny margins of everyday life and sometimes we question if the time, the rejection, or what we have to say is worth it. It is. Stories can move the world and we need your voice now, more than ever.

6. What are you working on next?

I just finished the copyedits for another MG novel, *A Swirl of Ocean*, which will be out in the summer of 2019. It's about a girl who swallows the ocean to try to understand her past and where she came from.

Discussion Questions

1. Cora's family is homeless for most of the book. Have you ever met anyone who is homeless? What were your impressions of them? What do you think they would want you to know about them, other than being homeless?
2. Cora's little sister Adare is described as "different" and acts different than most kids, but she makes people smile, regardless. List some ways Adare is different and the same as other kids. List some ways Adare made you smile.
3. Cora is embarrassed by her sister, but also admires her. What makes you different from other people? Do you think it's something that others notice? Do you think it's something that people admire you for?
4. When Cora moves to Willa's house, she thinks it could be a "forever home." What makes you feel at home?
5. As Cora befriends Sabina, she learns that Sabina lives on a houseboat and never stays in one town for very long. How is that different from being "at home"? Do you think living in one place for a long time makes it feel more like home?
6. Cora believes she will never understand algebra. Her mother is convinced it will "click" for her someday. What's something you've struggled with that "clicked" one day? What's something you struggle with now, and do you believe it will "click" for you someday?
7. Climbing trees and knowing trees are an essential part of Cora's life. She focuses on the Tree of Heaven. Do you think she is like the Tree of Heaven? How?
8. Trees are a symbol of growth and change (branches and leaves), and also stability and foundation (trunk and roots). How do you think Cora grew/changed from the beginning of the book to the end? What do you think her stability/foundation is by the end?

Recipe: Frijoles Charros / Mexican Cowboy Beans

“The sauce bubbles. A thick, popping, breathing, living pot of spices and beans. The smoky smell catches the kitchen air... I place my hands around the bowl. Frijoles charros. All of a sudden, we’re living as if we have a past.”

Recipe adapted from [here](#).

Ingredients

1 pound dried pinto beans
Kosher salt
12 ounces diced bacon
1 medium white or yellow onion, diced
2 serrano chilies or 1 jalapeño, minced (remove seeds and ribs if you prefer less heat)
3 medium cloves garlic, minced (about 1 tablespoon)
2 14-ounce cans diced fire-roasted tomatoes
6 cups homemade or store-bought low-sodium chicken stock
2 bay leaves
Large handful chopped fresh cilantro for garnish

Method

1. Place beans in a large bowl and cover with water by double. Add 2 tablespoons kosher salt and stir to dissolve. Let soak 8 to 12 hours. Drain and rinse.
2. Heat bacon in a large Dutch oven over medium-high heat, stirring constantly, until fat is rendered and bacon is just starting to brown around the edges, about 5 minutes. Add onion and chilies and cook, stirring, until softened and just starting to brown, about 4 minutes. Add garlic and cook, stirring, until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add tomatoes and cook, stirring and scraping up browned bits from the bottom of the pan, until the liquid is thick and the mixture begins to sizzle, about 3 minutes.
3. Add beans, stock, bay leaves, and 2 teaspoons kosher salt. Bring to a boil over high heat, reduce to a bare simmer, cover, and cook until beans are just tender, about 45 minutes. Remove lid and continue cooking, stirring occasionally, until beans are completely creamy and liquid has thickened into a rich, creamy broth. Season to taste with salt. Discard bay leaves, stir in cilantro, and serve. Beans can be stored in the refrigerator for up to 1 week.

Activity: Identify Your Neighborhood Trees!

Cora spends all of *Just Under The Clouds* carrying around the tree tracking notebook she inherited from her father, keeping notes on all her neighborhood's trees—what kind of trees she sees and where they're located, when they bloom, when their leaves fall, and what kind of condition they're in. Sometimes, she also sketches the Tree of Heaven—her favorite tree, near the polluted Gowanus Canal.

For this month's activity, we're going to be learning how to identify trees and keep a tree journal, just like Cora! You can do this as a one-time activity, or—for even more fun and learning—you can keep the journal for a few months as the trees change around you.



Step 1: How to identify your neighborhood trees

Many trees can be identified by their leaves, but for the strongest chance of getting the right species, it's best to be able to reference **leaves**, **bark**, and any **fruit** (including pinecones) the tree produces.

There are many resources you can use in identifying your neighborhood's trees! For some kid-friendly tree identification guides, check out these books:

[The Tree Book For Kids \(And Their Grownups\)](#)

[Trees, Leaves, and Bark](#)

In addition, the websites below have step-by-step identification pages that can walk you through each of your tree's characteristics and then give suggestions of what the tree might be. (Be aware, though, if it's a less-common tree, it might not be able to find the correct answer—when I tried the fig tree pictured above, neither website correctly identified it.)

[Arbor Day Foundation: What Tree Is That?](#)

[Oplin: What Tree Is It?](#)

If none of these resources help you to identify your tree, you can also use a reverse image search on Google or try specific verbal search terms (I ultimately found the identity of my mystery fig tree by searching "large five-lobed rounded leaves").

Step 2: Keep A Tree Journal

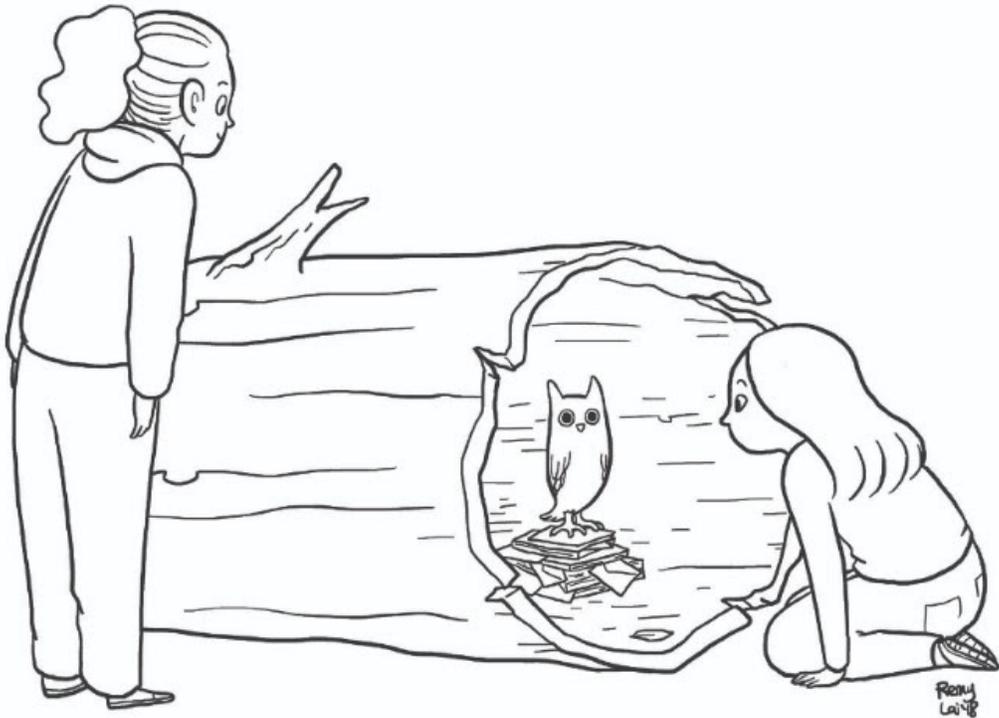
Using a blank sketchbook, or blank printer paper stapled together (lined paper isn't the best choice for this activity), create a tree journal to catalogue the trees in your neighborhood. Record things like:

- Tree type
- Leaf type ([simple](#), [palmately compound](#), [pinnately compound](#))
- A drawing or rubbing of the leaf, if desired
- Bark color and texture
- A drawing or rubbing of the bark, if desired
- Any fruit the tree may produce (pinecones, seed pods, or edible fruit)
- Any other formations on the tree—buds or flowers, [oak galls](#), any unusual features

If you plan to continue your journal over the course of a few months, you can also include season-specific information, such as:

- Leaf color
- When you first see buds
- Whether the tree flowers or drops any kind of seedpod or fruit, like a maple propeller, before leafing out
- Whether the tree develops fruit throughout the summer or autumn months, like many edible fruit trees do
- When the leaves fall in the autumn

Learning tree identification can be a way to become more connected to the world around us—plus, it's a lot of fun!



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