

PAX

SARA PENNYPACKER

ILLUSTRATED BY JON KLASSEN

DISCUSSION GUIDE

ABOUT THE BOOK

Pax was only a kit when his family was killed, rescued by “his boy,” Peter, from abandonment and certain death. Now the war front approaches, and when Peter’s father enlists, Peter has to move in with his grandfather. Far worse than being forced to leave home is the fact that Pax can’t go. Peter obeys his stern father and agrees to release Pax back into the wild. But before Peter makes it through even one night under his grandfather’s roof, regret and duty spur him to action; he sneaks out into the night, determined to find his beloved friend. This is the story of Peter, Pax, and their independent struggles to return to each other in the face of war.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

1. Discuss the connection between Peter and Pax. How has that connection developed over the years? Why must Peter release Pax? What makes Peter leave to look for Pax after he arrives at his grandfather’s home?
2. What is the importance of the toy soldier in the game Peter plays with Pax? Why is Peter surprised to find a box of toy soldiers at his grandfather’s house? What is the impact on Peter when he sees the picture of his father as a boy with his arm around a dog? Why do you think Peter’s father never talked about his dog?
3. Why is it so important to Vola to live alone? What does she mean when she says, “The plain truth can be the hardest thing to see when it’s about yourself” (p. 189)? How does that phrase pertain to Vola? How does it pertain to Peter and to Peter’s father?
4. Vola tells Peter, “People should tell the truth about what war costs” (p. 130). What costs of war does each of the characters in this book pay? Describe both the physical and emotional costs that these characters experience.
5. Discuss the concept of “nonduality,” or “two but not two,” that Vola explains to Peter (p. 186). How does this concept help Peter understand his connection to Pax? What does it mean to Vola?
6. Describe the steps in Peter’s journey that help him to understand that, when he finally finds Pax, he must let him go. Describe the steps in Pax’s journey that lead him to stay with his new family in the wild.

CRAFT AND STRUCTURE

7. Discuss the meaning of the phrase that appears before the story begins: “Just because it isn’t happening here doesn’t mean it isn’t happening” (p. 10). What does that phrase mean to you? Why do you think the author did not name a specific place or area as the setting of the book?
8. What does Vola mean when she asks Peter if he is “wild or tame” (p. 105)? What do those words mean to you? Why is it hard for the wild foxes to accept Pax when he finds them? Apply the concept of wild or tame to each of the main characters in the story to help explain their personalities.
9. Discuss the meaning of the final words in the book: “Sometimes the apple rolls very far from the tree” (p. 277). Why do these words appear as handwritten text? What do these words mean for Peter?
10. Why do you think the author decided to tell the story from two points of view with alternating chapters describing of the separate adventures of Peter and Pax? How does this structure help the story move forward and enhance your understanding of the plot?
11. What do you think Peter and Pax do in the moments after the story ends and in the weeks that follow? What clues in the book support your guesses?

INTEGRATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND IDEAS

12. Throughout the centuries and in many cultures, people have told stories, tales, and fables about foxes. What stories can you remember or can you find that have a fox as a main character? How would you compare some of these fictional characters to Pax and the other foxes in this novel?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. **Facts about Foxes.** Look up information about the red fox, including where in the world red foxes live and thrive, what they eat, and how they live in the wild. Write a paragraph about the most interesting aspect of fox behavior that you have found.
2. **Dealing with Hard Issues.** After a very difficult and fearful experience, such as fighting in a war, many people can develop a condition known as post-traumatic stress disorder. There are many ways to help people through this troubling illness. Learn about the symptoms of PTSD and create a list of how they relate to the life that Vola is living.
3. **Survival Skills.** When Peter starts out on his journey to find Pax, he packs very quickly. Do some research to discover some of the best techniques for survival in the wilderness. Which of these did Peter remember? Which of them were missing from his preparation? Make a list of the things Peter should have had with him and the skills he would have needed to survive if he had not met Vola.
4. **Taking a Turn at Bat.** At various places in the book, Peter refers to his love of baseball. Note all the places where Peter or Vola refer to baseball and make a list of the important life lessons that Peter has learned from this sport.

INTERVIEW WITH SARA PENNYPACKER

Why did you decide to write this book without a defined geographical setting?

Keeping everything about the war undefined—especially the setting and time—was critical to me. I didn't want the reader to be able to say, "Oh, this happened somewhere else," or "This couldn't happen now," because that would have allowed a sense of distance and comfort I didn't want. I wanted the reader to be able to identify with Peter as though he lived nearby, right now. It was harder to do than I'd predicted, by the way—technology and geographical clues kept trying to insert themselves into the story!

How did you go about researching the behavior and characteristics of foxes? What do you feel is the most important thing you learned about the fox?

Foxes! As always with a story, I do a lot of research because it bothers me if an author gets things wrong in a book. With foxes, the more I learned, the more impressed

I became—with their intelligence, their adaptability, and their complexity. And that altered the way I wrote the book—I decided to make it more realistic than I'd originally planned. To do that, I asked a red fox expert to go over the manuscript with me, and I thanked him in the acknowledgements for his generosity. A few times for the sake of the story I fictionalized their behavior, but only a few.

The most important thing I learned about—or maybe the most intriguing—is their intelligence. Foxes are just as smart as portrayed in the book—for instance, they are known to be able to understand the communications of many other species, not just crows, as I write in the book. For over fifty years in Siberia, people have been experimenting with domestication of foxes, and one fascinating result is this: unlike all other domesticated animals—dogs, cats, farm animals, etc.—who lose intelligence through domestication, foxes actually become *smarter* during the process!

When did you make the choice to tell the story through alternating points of view? Were there certain parts of the story that were best told through Peter's point of view and others from Pax's perspective?

In the early drafts, I only had one point of view—the fox's. Peter's came later, halfway into the writing, when I realized how much more light I could shed on the whole story if I included a human's understanding. Once I decided that, I next had to figure out which piece of the story belonged to which character. I made the decisions based on two factors: who had the most insight to share, and whose view was the most moving. The hardest to choose were the first and last chapters—I wrote them each out from both points of view, and only hope I chose the right ones. As a writer, the most rewarding parts of *Pax* were the events that were told from both Peter's and Pax's perspectives—they reminded me how differently we all perceive the same thing.

ABOUT SARA PENNYPACKER



Sara Pennypacker is the author of the award-winning, *New York Times* bestselling Clementine series, the novel *Summer of the Gypsy Moths*, and the picture books *Meet the Dullards*, *Pierre in Love*, and *Sparrow Girl*. She divides her time between Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and Florida. You can visit her online at www.sarapennypacker.com.



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