



*A Common Core–Aligned Guide to*

## THE WAYWARD CHILDREN SERIES

by SEANAN MCGUIRE

### ABOUT THIS GUIDE

- Does a person require a guide to read? To live? To become an adult?
- Can one be taught such lessons with a book? Or at a school?

These are the exquisite questions at the core of this gothic fantasy series – questions that this guide will not so much attempt to answer as to invite you, the reader, to build upon, to expand to universal form, and to lead you to your own excellence in word-craft and scholarship.

The Wayward Children novellas speak to both adult and young adult readers. Common Core-aligned content is annotated for high school students and educators. For college readers, the discussion questions and exercises below support coursework in genre studies (science fiction, fantasy, modern gothic novels) as well as creative writing and literary analysis.

### TO BEGIN...

#### The gothic fantasy novella<sup>1</sup>

1. From classics such as Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, to iconic character studies such as Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* to modern mini-masterworks such as Annie Proulx's *Brokeback Mountain*, the novella is a form that has inspired stunning works by writers across the ages.



- a. Go to the library or online to find a definition of the literary term novella.
  - b. As you read Seanan McGuire's work, note the ways in which the novella form is particularly suited to the plots and themes she explores.
  - c. Make a list of at least six notable novellas you would like to read.
2. One could argue that the novellas in Seanan McGuire's *Wayward Children* series are gothic fantasies.
    - a. Go to the library or online to find definitions for the terms 'gothic,' 'fantasy' and the literary phrase 'gothic fantasy.'
    - b. Make a list of 4 to 6 tenets or features you ex-

<sup>1</sup> Aligned with Common Core State Standards ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.10 and RL.11-12.10

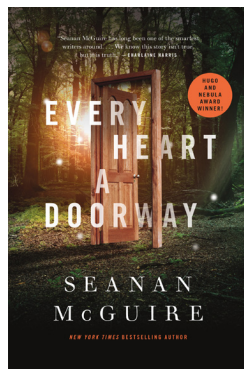
- pect to find in a gothic fantasy novella. Look for these as you read one or more *Wayward Children* story.
- c. Write a short essay or imagined 'letter to the editor' arguing that the gothic fantasy is an essential literary genre for teen and young adult readers. Cite examples from literature and life.
  3. From the title of the first novella to the final word of the last, the word "door" is essential, iconic, mysterious and far more complex than a reader could anticipate. Before you begin reading, create a drawing or painting, image collage, brainstorm word list or poem inspired by this seemingly mundane word.

## COME IN...

### BOOK 1

## EVERY HEART A DOORWAY

- Winner of the Hugo Award for Best Novella
- Winner of the Nebula Award for Best Novella
- Winner of the Locus Award for Best Novella
- A 2017 Alex Award Winner
- A 2017 Rainbow List Top 10 Pick
- A LibraryReads Pick (April 2016)



### Discuss<sup>2</sup>, Analyze & Write

1. In the Chapter 1 description of Eleanor West's Home for Wayward Children, what is important about this place being called a "home" and not a "school"? What is the meaning of the final two words of sub-text, "No Quests"?
2. Who is Eleanor West? Why might she be "dangerous" and to whom?
3. What might be important about the order in which Nancy meets denizens of Eleanor West's home?
4. Write two-sentence character descriptions of Sumi, Christopher, Jill, Jack and Seraphina.
5. How does Kade help Lundy and Eleanor? How might Kade's talent for sewing be particularly significant in terms of his path to Eleanor West, and his role at the school?
6. A sense of place – a true home – can be a vital part of a happy childhood and, perhaps, a happy adulthood, too. As Jack explains to Nancy, "For us, places we went were home. We didn't care if they were good or evil or neutral or what. We cared about the fact that for the first time, we didn't have to pretend to be something we weren't. We just got to *be*. That made all the difference in the world" (p. 56). Write your own paragraph explaining or defining a true "home."
7. Who is the first to die in the story? How does Eleanor react to this horrible event? What becomes of the body? What other gruesome events follow?
8. Why do you think Chapter 11 is titled "You Can Never Go Home"? What becomes clear about Jill's identity as the story ends? What sacrifice(s) does Jack make in the chapter?
9. Lush with evocative language, McGuire's novella also posits many apparent opposite or contrasting words that are, in the world of doors and wayward children, not contrasts at all. Divide a sheet of paper into two columns to fill with at least six pairs of "opposite" word tensions in the novel, such as "living/dead," "stillness/motion," and "real/unreal." With friends or classmates, discuss the way these pairs exist in tension in your own reality but have a different or more fluid relationship in the *Every Heart a Doorway*.<sup>3</sup>
10. On page 83, Nancy considers the way her parents sort of love "...wanted to fix her, and refused to see that she wasn't broken." Is Nancy broken, or possibly anorexic, in the "real" world? Cite evidence from the text to support your position. Write a 2- to 4-page "prequel" chapter describing Nancy's life the day before she found her "door." If desired, write a second short chapter describing the day she returned to her parents' home.<sup>4</sup>

2 Aligned with Common Core State Standards ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 and SL.11-12.1

3 Aligned with Common Core State Standards ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4

4 Aligned with Common Core State Standards ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3 and W.11-12.3

## LOOK BACK...

### BOOK 2

## DOWN AMONG THE STICKS & BONES

- **A LibraryReads Pick (June 2017)**



**"McGuire has a miraculous talent for examining adolescent discontent, wedding the strange with the poignant, the fearsome with the fascinating."**

**—RT Book Reviews (Top Pick! 4½ stars)**

**"Beautifully crafted and smartly written, this fairy-tale novella is everything that speculative fiction readers look for: fantastical worlds, diverse characters, and prose that hits home with its emotional truths."**

**—Library Journal (starred review)**

**"McGuire's exquisitely written fairy tale is about the choices that can alter the course of a life forever, lost innocence, and what it is to love and be loved."**

**—Publishers Weekly (starred review)**

## Discuss<sup>5</sup>, Analyze & Write

1. This novella begins in a world so literal, so pedantic, that it almost feels make-believe. Why do you think the author chose to begin the story in this way?
2. Go to the library or online to find a definition of the literary term 'origin story.' Although more commonly applied to the comic book genre, could you argue that it is a particularly apt term to apply to this gothic fantasy? Why or why not?
3. What techniques does the author use to show the evolution of Jacqueline and Jillian's senses of self as they journey across the moor? Visit an art museum or explore an online art source to find images that evoke similar transformational feelings as those worded by the author. Share your findings with friends or classmates.
4. On page 40, the author notes, "On the day our story truly starts...Jacqueline and Jillian sat in their room, on their respective beds, and the room was so full of anger and silence that it screamed." What is important about this moment? How does it encapsulate the relationship between the twins? How does it foreshadow elements of the world the twins are about to enter and the choices they must make?
5. Early in the story, Jacqueline and Jillian's grandmother, Louise, told them that they were "...perfect exactly as they were, and they would never need to change for anyone" (p. 25). Is this the central contradiction, crisis or lie of the novel? Do you think the twins' door would have opened if Louise, and the message she represented, had not been sent away?
6. In chapter 5, Jack chooses to go immediately with Dr. Bleak because: "She had a feeling that if she lingered, she would never leave, and again, that would go poorly for her sister...Jill trusted too easily, and got hurt even easier" (p. 91). Is Jack's insight surprising? Is it correct? Do you think she makes the right decision?
7. Are vampires and mad scientists opposites? Answer this question using quotes from the novel or information from other sources. Do vampires and mad scientists share similar origins, akin to the parallel childhoods of Jack and Jill? Could the observation that 'How quickly they grow apart, when there is something to be superior about' be applied to the twins, to the Master and Dr. Bleak, or to the girls' parents and others in their social and business worlds? Is this statement true in your own world? Explain your answer.
8. Go to the library or online to find a definition of the term "binary." List at least four ways this term applies to the story, impacts the literary structure, or affects the rules of moor village where the twins find themselves at home.
9. Describe elements of their moor world which the twins find "good" or satisfying but seem to the reader to be rather horrible. Does Jillian realign all possible notions of good with her attack on Alexis? Had you been Jack, could you have found something to love in Jill after this attack?
10. What confuses Chester about the girls upon their return on the final page of the novella? With friends

<sup>5</sup> Aligned with Common Core State Standards ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 and SL.11-12.1

or classmates, discuss who the “small boy” referenced on the page could be. Write a 2- to 3-page scene that immediately follows the final moment of the story, taking an omniscient third-person point of view akin to that of Seanan McGuire.<sup>6</sup>

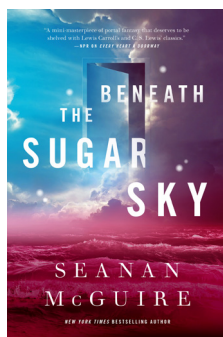
## REAWAKEN...

### BOOK 3

## BENEATH THE SUGAR SKY

- A LibraryReads Pick (January 2018)

**“We’re told some doors open only once, but readers will beg McGuire to keep the door open to these worlds in perpetuity. Phenomenal.”**  
—Booklist (starred review)



## Discuss<sup>7</sup>, Analyze & Write

- If you have read the two previous novels in this series, do you think *Down Among the Sticks and Bones* can be viewed as a prequel to *Every Heart a Doorway*? And, if so, how does *Beneath the Sugar Sky* fit into this timeline – or change your sense of time (or literary time) altogether?<sup>8</sup>
- Early in the novella, the narrator says that none of the parents who deposited their children at her home could have called Eleanor West “a killer.” Why might that word even be mentioned? What does the narrator want readers to understand about the “home” Eleanor provides and the children who stay with her?
- When Cora arrives at the school, she becomes fast friends with Nadya. What physical and emotional commonalities do the girls share?
- How is Rini introduced to the Eleanor West? Explain how Rini’s presence in the story makes time an essential driver of the plot.
- Who is Christopher? What real-life trauma from his life is referenced in the story? How does this align with the world to which he seeks to return? Do you think Christopher is actually still “dying” in the “real” world? Why or why not?
- Popularized by American mythologist Joseph Campbell, the concept of the “hero’s journey” or “monomyth” posits that all mythic tales follow a universal cycle of awakening, journey from know to unknown world, tests, rewards and return to the known. Go to the library or online to learn more about the hero’s journey in literature. Diagram the plot of *Beneath the Sugar Sky* using a circular format as seen in many hero’s journey graphic planners. Do you feel this novella fits the hero’s journey mold? If so, how does this type of analysis enhance your understanding of the story?
- Who is Ponder? Why do you think the author gave him this name, and chose a “candy” world and a “sugary” romance to be the source of Rini’s life? When Rini insists that she is “important,” what does she really mean?
- Who and when is the Baker? Where is she from? Does her power make sense? Why or why not?
- Kade aspires to more fully understand the worlds of the doors, and aspires to create a compass to organize his knowledge. Using clues from this and other novellas in the series, draw your own diagram organizing the different names, environments, rules and types– nonsense, logic, etc. – of worlds and their relationships in the *Wayward Children* universe.
- Near the end of the novel, the narrator explains that those who had found a door “...had a need trapped somewhere in their bones, gnawing constantly, trying to get out” (p. 157). How might this be both a literal and a metaphorical explanation? Is fantasy always and unquestionably make-believe? Create a song, poem or visual artwork to elucidate your answer.

<sup>6</sup> Aligned with Common Core State Standards ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3 and W.11-12.3

<sup>7</sup> Aligned with Common Core State Standards ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 and SL.11-12.1

<sup>8</sup> Aligned with Common Core State Standards ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.5 and 11-12.5



## FINALLY...

### Review, Consider & Imagine

1. Two truths and a lie. Invite yourself into one of the above novellas. Invent a new name for yourself and choose three essential character attributes, two of which are truly qualities you possess and one which is a talent, quirk or flaw of your imagination. Write yourself into a favorite scene.
2. How many cisgender boys populate the *Wayward Children* novellas? How might this series be read as an exploration of the tensions between gender, physical self and psychological/emotional identity? Explain your answers.
3. From Hogwarts to Eleanor West's Home, why do you think boarding schools and similar establishments provide essential settings for fantasy novels? Cite examples from this series and other fantasies you have read to support your answer.
4. Revisit the novels to find examples of reimagined mythologies, such as vampire and mermaid, and re-interpreted literary fantasy worlds, such as Wonderland and Oz. How do these correlate to specific worlds in the Wayward universe? How might they correlate to different ways children are misunderstood in their "real" worlds? Is a real a "four-letter word," as Eleanor West seems to believe?<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Aligned with Common Core State Standards ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.9 and RL.11-12.7

## OR, NOT SO FINALLY...

1. Near the end of *Every Heart a Doorway*, Nancy discovers a note from Sumi with the words, "You're nobody's doorway but your own, and the only one who gets to tell you how your story ends is you" (p. 168). In *Beneath the Sugar Sky*, Nadya takes a dive before the final lines, "There is kindness in the world, if we know how to look for it. If we never start denying the door" (p. 174). What is kindness? What is a "door"?
2. Is holding onto childhood good or bad? Can one choose to hold onto childhood at all? If so, should it be a goal for adults? Why or why not?
3. Seanan McGuire concludes her online author information paragraph with the following sentence: ***She writes all biographies in the third person, because it's easier that way.*** How might this concept reflect an essential theme of the Wayward Children series? Define this theme and explain your answer.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Aligned with Common Core State Standards LITERACY.RL.9-10.2 and RL.11-12.2



### About the Author

**SEANAN MCGUIRE** is the author of the October Daye urban fantasy series, the InCryptid series, and other works. She also writes darker fiction as Mira Grant.

Seanan lives in Seattle with her cats, a vast collection of creepy dolls, and horror movies, and sufficient books to qualify her as a fire hazard.

She was the winner of the 2010 John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and in 2013 she became the first person ever to appear five times on the same Hugo ballot.