



**Michigan Diaries:
Schools**

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Discussion Prompts

***The Honest Truth*
by Dan Gemeinhart**

**Grade: 7
Subject: ELA**

Notes	This book is set up with paired chapters, each “main” chapter having an associated “half” chapter. Prompts are written for a class reading at the rate of one pair of chapters per week.
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Chapter	Discussion Prompts
1 and 1½	• When you were a kid, did you ever try to run away from home? What was your plan? How far did you get? • Mark is able to get Beau to hide in a duffel bag and be quiet on the train. What’s the largest thing you’ve ever snuck in somewhere it wasn’t allowed? • Mark buys a ticket to one place, switches clothes, and then uses a different ticket to go somewhere else. What have you done to throw someone off your trail? • Do you think Mark’s trick would really fool the cops? Why or why not? • Mark smashes his grandfather’s pocket watch. What’s the most important thing you’ve ever broken? • Mark feels like the watch was a reminder that “life is running out” (5). Tell us about a time when you felt the pressure of time running out.



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	• If you could know the exact time in the future that you were going to die, would you want to know it? • Mark tells himself “I don’t need anybody” (7), but feels like it sounds mean, not strong. Have you ever said something and had it come out differently than you meant it to? • Mark knows his parents will be terribly sad and afraid, but he goes anyway. Is it right for him to do this? • Mark’s mom starts laughing, even though she’s really very afraid. How do you respond when you’re afraid? • The author, Gemeinhart, writes each chapter with a main part, like “1,” and then a paired part, like “1½.” Why do you think he did it this way? What was he trying to make the reader feel or think? Was he successful?
2 and 2½	• When Beau is set free from the duffel bag, Mark notices that “His whole body was wagging” (15). Tell us about a time when you felt trapped and then set free. • What would you do if you were stuck outside in a dark city all night? • On pages 15-16, something scares Mark and Beau by making a big crashing sound in a dark alley, but we never find out what made the noise. Do you think authors should explain everything that happens, or is it ok to never tell the reader some things? • At the cheap diner, “Everyone seemed tired and unhappy” (17), even the waitress. Have you ever been in a place where it seemed like no one wanted to be there?



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- At first the waitress is just there to bring food, but we see later that she has a black eye, and learn that her dad is a drunkard. Tell us about a time that you learned something surprising about a person you didn't know well.
- What's a happy memory you have from being a very little kid?
- Mark thinks his best friend Jessie will guess where he's going, even though his parents can't. Do you have anyone who can always figure out what you're going to do?
- The way the waitress chews gum really annoys Mark. What's a noise or small thing people do that really annoys you?
- Mark struggles to eat the unappealing food at the diner. What's the worst meal you ever managed to eat? Why did you eat it?
- The waitress doesn't notice Mark's picture on TV even though it's right over her head! Tell a story about a time that you missed something obvious.
- The waitress says, "There's more good folks than bad in the world, believe it or not" (25). Do you think that's true? Why or why not?
- The waitress tries to help Mark, but she imagines that his problem is like her own life, so she's helping him with the wrong thing. Has anyone ever tried to help you in a way that was actually totally useless?



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	• After Mark rejects the waitress' help, she says, "You're an angry kid... But maybe you got reasons" (28). Do Mark's reasons justify his anger? • This chapter ends with a cliffhanger! We see the danger behind Mark, but we don't find out what happens. Why did Gemeinhart end the chapter this way? Mark left a secret note for Jessie in a loose brick. Have you ever had a secret spot to pass notes to a friend?
3 and 3½	• Each chapter starts with "Miles to Go" and the number of miles. Why do you think Gemeinhart wrote it this way? What thoughts or feelings does he want the reader to have? Did you have those thoughts or feelings? • The teens noticed Mark because he was counting his money out in the open. Tell us about a time you did something and only later realized it was really risky. • Mark calls the teens following him "wolves" (40). Would you rather have people think you're like a wolf, or think you're like a rabbit? • Mark tries to protect Beau by giving up his money. Tell us about a time you gave up something to protect someone or something else. • During the fight, Mark takes a picture of his mugger! Tell us about a time that you stopped during a dramatic moment to do something mundane. • "Beau came out of that duffel bag like hot burning justice" (44). Tell us about a time you rescued somebody, or a time somebody else rescued you.



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	• Mark doesn't cry during the fight, but does cry after. Tell us about a time that all the emotion hit you after the action was over. • Each of the "1/2" chapters starts with a haiku. Whose haiku are these? Do you think they're written by a character in the story, or just sort of there? • Jessie goes to ask Mark's mom a question that she actually knows the answer to. Have you ever had a question that you could guess the answer, but didn't want to know it? • Mark was right: Jessie can figure out where he's going. Should she tell his parents? Why or why not?
4 and 4½	• When he wakes up, Mark is filthy, beaten up, and behind a dumpster, and he smells just awful. What's the worst you've ever smelled? • There's no restaurant called San Cristobal's Restaurante in Seattle. Why did Gemeinhart make up a restaurant here? Would it have been better for him to use a real restaurant instead? Why or why not? • What's the most comforting food for you when times are tough? Who makes it for you? • "The song sounded like it was about heartbreak, or hope, or maybe a little bit of both" (57). Why do people like sad songs so much? Is there a sad song you love? • At this point, Mark thinks that his journey seems "stupid. And impossible. Hopeless" (60). Tell us about a time you wanted something stupid and impossible and hopeless.



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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Overall, how do you feel about Mark's decision to go on this journey?• At the Restaurante, the fact that Jess taught Mark a few words of Spanish comes in handy. Tell us about a time that you were able to use a skill that a friend taught you.• "Here's what I don't get: why giving up always sounds good until you do it" (64). Have you ever given up on something and regretted it?• Mark lies to the "angels" in the restaurant, just like he already lied to the waitress in the diner, and the ticket counter guy, and his parents. Here he feels bad about it, but says "it had to be done" (66). Can lying sometimes be necessary or good? Why or why not?• Jessie comes to ask Mark's mom a question, and she doesn't want to talk about it, but Jessie keeps asking. Tell us about a time you had to keep persisting to get what you needed from someone.• "Sometimes crying is easier when someone is crying with you. But sometimes that only makes it worse" (70). Would you rather cry alone or with other people?• Mark's mom's hands are described as "a mom's hands, soft, with only small wrinkles, and chipping polish on the nails" (70). What do your hands say about you?• So far Mark's mom and dad have had to sit around waiting while the cops look for Mark. Have you ever been in a situation where all you could do was wait? |
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5 and 5½	• When you're on a bus or train or plane, would you rather talk to the people in the seats next to you or ignore them? Why? • Shelby gets "so close I could smell her Doritos breath" (76). Tell us about a time someone got in your personal space. • Have you ever had to get away from an unwanted conversation? How did you escape? • Shelby directly asks Mark about exactly the things he doesn't want to talk about. What's more frustrating, people who are too direct or people who are too indirect? • Mark teaches Shelby about haiku. Have you ever taught somebody something that you learned in a class? How did it go? • Shelby's way of dealing with anger is to not talk to the person she's angry at. Have you ever given anyone the silent treatment? • Shelby is confused by Mark's old-fashioned, pre-digital camera. What are some old, non-digital types of technology you've used? Pay phones, cameras, TVs, watches? Where did you use them and why? • Mark says that he takes pictures because he wants to catch and preserve the moment. What's a moment in your life that you wanted to preserve? • Mark even wants to preserve bad or sad moments, like getting mugged or breaking his grandfather's watch. Would you rather have a perfect memory or be able to forget sometimes? It's easy for Mark to say that Shelby shouldn't be angry, but he is full of anger himself. Have you ever given
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	someone else good advice, but not listened to your own advice? • Do you keep old pictures, cards, or notes? What do you do with them? • Tell us about a great time you had during a summer vacation. • Mark was inspired to want to climb the mountain by his grandpa. What's something an older relative inspired you to do? • "She knew, with terrible sureness, what he was doing. But there's lots of kinds of terrible in the world. What he was planning to do was only one kind. And maybe not the worst" (89). Tell us about a time that you had to make the least terrible choice when all your options were terrible. • Jessie is angry at the doctor that diagnosed Mark, which is natural but not really fair. Have you ever been angry at the wrong person?
6 and 6½	• Mark leaves Shelby a note and sneaks away, just like he did with his parents. If you were sleeping, would you rather someone gave you a note and left quietly, or wake you up to say good-bye? • Mark doesn't have any money for the shuttle now, and has to figure out what to do next. Tell us about a time that your first plan didn't work and you had to improvise. • "I got lost in the crowd. I liked it" (96). Would you rather be invisible in a big group, or have everyone notice you?



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- Mark tries to sneak onto the bus by looking unimportant and like he's with the adults. Have you ever tried to trick someone into underestimating you?
- "Little kids are dumb. They'll just say whatever stupid thing comes into their head, no matter how true it is" (98). Tell us about a time that someone blurted out a truth that no one wanted to hear.
- Mark's mom says there's no use in being afraid of dying. Is she right or wrong?
- What is an object that holds an important memory for you?
- Jessie chooses not to tell where Mark is, because she decides it's Mark's choice to make. Do you think she's right or wrong not to tell? Do you think the reason she gives is a good one?
- Jessie gives up one secret to keep another. Have you ever felt strained by having too many secrets?
- In this chapter, Jessie is talking to her mom, and we know from earlier in the book that they speak Spanish. Here they talk mostly English to each other, with just a few words in Spanish (words that English-speaking readers are likely to know!). Do you think this is supposed to be really what they're saying to each other, or are they talking in Spanish and it's been mostly translated for the reader? If you were writing about two characters talking in a different language than the book is in, how else could you handle it?



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7 and 7½	• At the start of the chapter, Mark “tried to look sad and weak” (109) to get a ride. Has anyone ever tried to play on your sympathy to get something? • Every few pages, Mark tells us something and says “That’s the truth.” He says this repeatedly to us, the readers, and at the same time lies a lot to the other characters. Why did Gemeinhart write the story this way? How does the repeated use of “That’s the truth” make you feel about Mark? Do you think Gemeinhart wanted that reaction? • “Halfway across I realized it had been a dumb decision, but I kept on going” (113). Tell us about a time you realized you’d made a dumb decision but kept going! • At the very last second, right when he thinks he’s out of danger, Mark falls into the water. How often does someone fail at the last second in stories? Have you ever seen that happen in real life? • Jessie thinks about calling the tip line, because then no one would know she told Mark’s secret. Does being anonymous make a difference in how right or wrong it is to tell? Why or why not? • Mark doesn’t want to cry in front of his parents. Who is it easiest and hardest to cry in front of? Why? • Have you ever kept a secret for someone? (You don’t have to share the secret!) • Mark talks to Jessie about his cancer, his sadness, and his fears, saying “I can’t hold it all by myself” (118). Later Jessie
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	talks to Mark about her parents' divorce. What are other things that people often can't hold by themselves? • Tell us about a time you counted on someone, or a time someone counted on you. • What's something you've read or watched so many times you've memorized it?
8 and 8½	• Mark makes it onto the island, but then is in danger from the cold. Tell us about a time that you solved one problem only to have it turn into a new problem. • Have you ever tried to start a fire? How did it go? • After Mark survives the river and the cold, he bursts out laughing. Tell us about a time you got past a danger. How did you react when you realized you were safe? • Mark doesn't mind the danger to himself, but he's very upset that he put Beau in danger. Is it worse to put yourself in danger or to endanger others? • Mark takes a picture of Beau and the fire, a little warm safe spot in a dark and scary world. What's a place that's been a warm safe spot for you? Tell us about how you found comfort there. • All through this chapter, Mark is looking for the mountain but can't see it. What effect on the reader do you think Gemeinhart wants this to have? Does he get it? • "I was every different kind of sad there is" (131). What are some kinds of sad? • Tell us about a time you had a bad dream.



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	• When something very bad happens, would you rather stay home or try to do your normal routine? • Have you ever had something happen, and afterwards it felt like everyone treated you different at school? How did you handle it? • “You can’t fit a secret in a backpack” (138). Well, where can you fit a secret, then? • Tell us about a time that someone wasn’t there, and you missed them throughout your day.
9 and 9½	• Talking about the phrase “a stranger is just a friend you haven’t met yet” (140), Mark says that it’s usually dumb, but “I guess just about anything can be true, sometimes” (140). What are some other sayings or proverbs that are only sometimes true? • What’s the difference between smile lines and wrinkles? • Wesley thinks dogs are important for living a good life. Do you agree? Are there any other animals that you think are important for a good life? • Feeling warm and eating a sandwich, Mark tells us, “I wanted all the clocks everywhere to stop” (145). Tell us about a time you felt like this. • Wesley’s story is about his son, who was a soldier and died far from home, and Wesley couldn’t do anything about it. Tell us about a time that you were unable to help someone. • “I knew I had to be sad or mad. One or the other. I made my choice” (148). Would you rather be sad or mad?



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	• Mark is upset that the news is sharing information about his cancer. Have you ever found out that someone shared private information about you? How did you feel? • Mark is frustrated and angry at people pitying him all the time. Why do you think that is? Can you relate to that? • “Maybe that’s all he wants. Or at least all he gets. And maybe they should let him have it” (157). Wesley is the first adult who figures out who Mark is and could stop him. Should he? • How does the arrival of the storm make a difference to Jessie’s decision to keep or tell Mark’s secret? Does it really change something for her, or is she just looking for an excuse to tell? • Another phrase Mark uses repeatedly is “Here’s what I don’t get.” Why do you think Gemeinhart uses this phrase over and over? Do you think he’s trying to get the same effect as when he repeats “That’s the truth,” or is this a little different?
10 and 10½	• Mark’s grandpa made him promise to climb Mt. Rainier. Was it right or wrong of him to ask for that promise? Why? • Mark wants Wesley to let him choose to climb the mountain, because he doesn’t get many choices in his life. Tell is about a time you fought for your right to make a choice. • “Let me climb the mountain. It’s all I want” (161). If you thought you would die soon, what’s the one thing you would absolutely want to do first?



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	• Wesley agrees to keep the secret, but says he can only do so for a little while. What's a time when you could only hold out for so long? • Mark says of the unpleasant sales clerk, "She couldn't be the last person I talked to" (164). Tell us about a time when an ending or a good-bye didn't go how you wanted it to. • Beau looks like both Jessie and Mark. Does Gemeinhart also make Beau a little bit like both of them in other ways? What ways? Why do you think he does this? • Have you ever had to go to great lengths to communicate with someone? • When Jessie gets the phone call, she's so surprised she drops her glass. This happens all the time in movies and books, but have you ever seen someone drop something in surprise in real life? • Tell us about a time that a phone call made you joyful. • Who are the people you say "I love you" to, if anyone? What different meanings does it have?
11 and 11½	• Mark puts his note for his parents into a film canister and clips it to Beau. Why do you think Gemeinhart chose to use a film canister here? Would the story feel different if Mark had used, say, a ziploc bag? • Mt. Rainier is so tall that the air becomes thin and hard to breathe. Have you ever been somewhere that the air was very different from the air you're used to? • Who are the people who miss you when you're not there?



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	• “Here’s what I don’t get: just about anything. I don’t get any of it at all” (179). Have you ever felt like that? What did you do to straighten it out for yourself? • Mark shouts that it’s “It’s not fair!” (179) that he has cancer. Is he right or wrong to be angry about that? • “There was only up and down, and I was going up” (180). Have you ever had to figure out where you were going when you couldn’t see? • “They weren’t off the path. <i>I was</i>” (182). Tell us about a time that you got lost, literally or metaphorically. • What’s something that someone told you that you heard in your head over and over afterward? • “To the people on the news, it was two different stories. Not to Jessie” (187). Have you ever known about a connection that other people didn’t see? • “How they help each other. Even when they don’t want to. Even when help isn’t wanted” (189). Tell us about a time when you helped somebody even though they didn’t want to be helped.
12 and 12½	• Throughout the book, Mark’s chapters are the “main” chapters, written in first-person and with regular font. Jessie’s chapters are the “½” chapters, written in third person and with italic font. What impact do these differences have on the reader? How does this kind of separation change the feeling of the story?



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	• Mark feels like it's okay that he's lost, because he only needs to go up. Have you ever gotten into a difficult spot but felt okay about it? • Would you rather be lost in snow or lost in the desert? • Beau gives a warning bark just in time to keep Mark from falling into a crevasse. Has a timely warning ever saved you from danger? • Mark finishes off his supplies here. Have you ever run out of snacks on a trip? • The tip line is playing a big role at this point. Tell us about a time you gave someone a secret tip. • Do you think it was Jessie or Wesley who called? Why?
13 and 13½	• Between this and the previous chapter, Beau and Mark have each saved the other from the crevasse. Have you ever helped someone who helped you back? • "Dogs die. But not my dog. Not like that" (209). Have you ever had to accept that something bad was going to happen? Could you affect how it happened, even if you couldn't stop it? • "I was sorry for so much" (211). Have you ever caused much more trouble than you expected? • It's actually the thoughts of the strangers he met on his journey that make Mark start to turn around, not his mom or dad or Jessie. Tell us about a time that a stranger had a surprisingly big effect on your life.



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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Both Mark and Beau survive their adventure on the mountain. If you were writing the story, would you have let Mark die? What about Beau?• There's no answer to whether it was Jessie or Wesley who called! Why do you think Gemeinhart left us hanging like that? What does he want us to feel? Do you think he succeeds?• Mark says he learned that "everything can make sense and be understood" (227). Do you think that's true? Why or why not?• "What Jessie said wasn't a lie. It was just a better kind of truth" (228). In a book full of people lying to each other, why does Gemeinhart end here? Tell us how you feel about this choices by the author.• Have you ever told a little lie to help someone or make someone feel better? What happened?• So according to the ending, Jessie wrote the story down, but told it using first-person for Mark's chapters and third-person for her own. Does this change the effect of the paired-up chapters for you? |
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