

Lucy in Between

by Sarah Callender

Discussion Questions

7th & 8th Grade ELA Classroom

A Note on These Questions

These discussion questions are designed to open and inspire conversations. There are no right answers here—only honest ones. Each set includes optional connections to Pablo Neruda’s *The Book of Questions*, the collection of poems that winds through Lucy’s story. Neruda’s questions are unanswerable by design; they invite wonder rather than resolution. So do these.

Lucy in Between deals with loss, grief, suicide, mental health, family rupture, and the slow, uneven work of healing. Some questions may bring up personal feelings or memories. That’s okay. Communities—whether classrooms, families, or book clubs—grow closer when they make room for the hard (and the beautiful) stuff of life.

A note on content: this novel depicts suicide and its aftermath with care and honesty. If any reader needs support, the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (call or text 988 in the US) is available 24/7.

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These questions move from close reading of the story into craft and style, and they circle back to the big questions at the heart of the book.

Story & Character

1. The reader knows, even before the story begins, that Lucy’s family experiences a death by suicide. Because a death by suicide is often an especially complicated death, Callender and her publisher wanted potential readers to know what was coming. How did that knowledge impact the experience of reading the novel? Do you wish you had not known this would happen? Why or why not?
2. Lucy describes herself as an aspiring mime artist—a pretty strange passion for a young person. What do you think mime means to Lucy? What does her love of pantomime reveal about her? What do you learn about communication through her commitment to the art of mime?

3. Lucy often feels invisible in her own family, overshadowed by Henry's musical gift and, as a result, undervalued by her mother. Was Lucy truly undervalued? When have you felt unseen or been underestimated? Why do you think you were undervalued, and what were (or are) the repercussions?
4. Henry is a seventeen-year-old violin prodigy who is struggling with depression. Lucy struggles to understand how someone so talented can be so unhappy. Why can it be hard to understand someone else's depression? What does Lucy eventually come to understand—and what remains mysterious to her?
5. When Lucy and her mother head to Peru, they're both running from their grief, a grief they're experiencing in very different ways. What does each of them need that the other can't provide? How does their relationship change—or begin to change—over the course of the novel? Do their responses to grief surprise you? Do their responses seem realistic? Why or why not?
6. Ernesto, the local bookstore owner in Peru, becomes more present for Lucy than either of her parents. What does Lucy find in this person that she can't find with her parents? What is it about a stranger—or someone outside your family—that can sometimes reach you when your family can't?
7. Ernesto forced Lucy to confront her loss, her grief, and her inability to understand why Henry died. What motivated him to push her from her comfort zone, and why was it helpful and/or harmful?

Figurative Language & Imagery

8. The novel's title, *Lucy in Between*, works on multiple levels. Make a list of all the "in betweens" you notice Lucy inhabiting throughout the book—emotional, geographical, relational. Which "in between" feels most important to the story? Which one surprised you? Which ones felt familiar and which felt totally foreign?
9. Callender writes with what reviewers call "searing prose" and a "poetic voice." Find a passage—a sentence, a paragraph, an image—that struck you as particularly vivid. Read it aloud to your group. What makes it work? What would be lost if Callender had described the same thing in plain, direct language?
10. Grief in this novel isn't just an emotion—it becomes almost a physical presence, something with texture and weight. How does Callender use imagery and sensory detail to make grief feel tangible rather than abstract? Find at least one example.

11. What do you appreciate about Lucy's narrative voice and her unique personality? What do you find irritating about her character, personality, or voice and why?

Narrative Voice & Author's Style

12. Lucy's narration is described as "fierce and funny" and "self-aware." How does Callender use humor in a novel about something as serious as suicide and grief? Does the humor feel right to you, or does it ever feel surprising or uncomfortable? What would be missing from the book if it weren't there?
13. Callender is a middle school English teacher who writes middle-grade novels—this is her debut. Based on the story and the characters, what can you infer about her beliefs and opinions of young people? Do you agree with those beliefs?

Neruda & the Bigger Questions

14. Pablo Neruda's *The Book of Questions* is full of questions that can't really be answered—things like wondering about the color of time or what autumn uses to make its leaves. When Ernesto gives Lucy *The Book of Questions*, why is Lucy so frustrated and irritated? What role does this collection of poems play in Lucy's and her mother's grief?
15. Which poem-questions from Neruda's collection resonate with you? Which do you find irritating or frustrating? Why do you think these poem-questions evoke these feelings and opinions?
16. Kirkus Reviews says this is "a complicated topic handled with tenderness." After reading, do you agree? What specific choices did Callender make—in structure, in voice, in what she shows and what she withholds—that make the book feel tender rather than heavy-handed?