

## A Reading Group Guide to

### *Cyclone*

By Doreen Cronin

#### **About the Book**

Riding the Cyclone, the world-famous Coney Island roller coaster, was supposed to be the highlight of Nora's summer. But right after they disembark, Nora's cousin Riley falls to the ground and doesn't get up. Nora had begged and dragged Riley onto the ride, and no matter what the doctors say—that she had a heart condition, that it could have happened at any time—Nora knows it was her fault. Then, as Riley comes out of her coma, she's not really Riley at all. The cousin who used to be loud and funny and unafraid now can't talk or go to the bathroom by herself. No, she's only 10 percent Riley. With guilt eating her up on the inside even worse than a Coney Island hot dog, Nora thinks she knows how to help get 100 percent Riley back. But what Nora doesn't realize is that the guilt will only get worse as that percentage rises.

#### **Discussion Questions**

1. While Nora is waiting to ride the Cyclone, she feels both determined and afraid. Have you ever felt this way? Has your determination ever pushed you to do something when your gut is telling you not to? Why do you think it's so important for Nora to take this ride?
2. Can you understand the attraction to scary rides, movies, and experiences? If you like scary things, can you explain why? If not, share why you don't enjoy these experiences. What is the scariest thing you've ever done? How did you feel after it was over?
3. Have you ever exerted your will over a friend, as Nora does with Riley? Did you feel sorry afterward? Guilty? Were there consequences? Have you ever let a friend persuade you to do something? Why do you think that young people give in to peer pressure? Can you name some examples of dangerous things that teens persuade each other to do?
4. After Riley collapses, Nora recounts all she did not do for Riley: she didn't call 911, she didn't get down on the ground, etc. Why didn't she do more to help her? What might Riley have done if it was Nora who collapsed? What would you have done? Have you ever witnessed an accident or incident like this? How did it make you feel?
5. Aunt Maureen tells Nora that Riley's stroke “‘might have been the very best bad thing that could have happened.’” Talk about why she feels that way. Do you think that hearing this helped to alleviate Nora's enormous feelings of guilt? Can you share an example from your own life where an initially bad experience actually turned out to be a good thing?

6. How does the book's title manifest itself throughout the events of the book? What do you think are the other major themes? How do the characters' actions support these themes? Can you suggest some subthemes as well?
7. Nora observes many of the adults lying at one point or another: not being honest about Riley's condition at first, saying that they are "all right" when that's clearly not true. Even Riley lies about "Georgina." In your opinion, are these lies justified by the unfolding events? Is there ever a good reason to tell a lie, or is it more important to always tell the truth? Can you give examples of lies you've told or ones that were told to you that were motivated by a desire to protect someone?
8. Family dynamics are at the heart of this story: siblings, cousins, parents, and children all intersect in interesting ways. Describe how Riley's collapse affects the family in both good and bad ways. Give examples of how both are exhibited in scenes from the book.
9. At one point, Nora says, "I had never once seen my dad look scared before." Have you seen your parents scared? What were they afraid of? What are you most scared of?
10. What does it mean when the girls refer to "tomato soupin"? Is this a philosophy that you can get behind? Does your family have any unique expressions like this?
11. For most of the book, we only see Riley through other characters' eyes. Nora says that Riley "really was one of those people who it is always good to see." Does being told that Riley has a potentially dangerous secret impact your view of her? Did your assumptions and feelings about Riley change when she woke up and began interacting with the other characters? How?
12. Nora says that Monica is "managing my expectations." Discuss what she means here, and give examples from the book of occasions when the adults do this. Can you share examples from your own life of times when adults managed your expectations?
13. "One person is always a little bit left out when there are three," Jack says to Nora. Discuss the triangles formed by relationships in the book. Have you ever been involved in a friendship, romantic, or familial triangle? Do you agree with Jack? Can you think of any positive examples of triangles?
14. Why do you think Jack and Nora don't talk about medical things very much? Why do the other families pretend not to see when difficult things happen in the hospital, such as family arguments and "Code Blue" incidents? Do you think this is a respect for privacy, or do they find it embarrassing to witness such intimate incidents?
15. Discuss how the hospital setting influences theme, plot, and character. How might the story have differed if Riley had only been in the hospital for a few days and done more recovering at home? Did you find the medical footnotes helpful? Were any of the medical terms new to you?
16. Aunt Elayne says to Nora, "You can be sad and still be okay." After reading this book, do you agree with this idea?

17. When Nora gets mad because her summer is ruined, what was your reaction? Did you understand how she felt? Consider her friendship with Jack: Is he getting as much out of their connection as Nora is? Overall, did you find her to be a likeable character, or would you have been better friends with Riley or Sophia?

18. Aunt Maureen could “see past 20 percent Riley.” Discuss the role of hope in the story. Which characters are the most hopeful? Why is it easier for some people to hope than others? What happens when hopes are dashed, such as when Jack’s brother dies?

19. Until she had a big secret to keep, “Riley was the only teenage girl in the world who didn’t want privacy.” Talk about the fight that Nora and Riley have about the older boy. Was Nora right to be worried and protective? What would you do if you discovered that one of your friends was doing this? Is telling the truth worth risking a friendship?

### **Extension Activities**

1. The sentence that Nora thinks sounds so horrible is also a miniature summary of the book: “My cousin had a stroke at the amusement park.” Choose 5-10 other books that you’ve read, and distill them down to one sentence each.

2. Put yourself inside Nora’s head, and write a letter to Riley apologizing for the events that transpired.

3. Put yourself inside Riley’s head, and write a letter to your father telling him what happened to you.

4. Choose one of the following to research, and then write a report about it.

- Investigate old roller coasters, including the Cyclone. When were they first created, and how safe were they? How were they constructed as opposed to today’s standards? How has the design expanded or changed?
- Pick one of Riley’s favorite presidents: Ulysses S. Grant or Calvin Coolidge. What were some of their goals and policies? How did the American people feel about their leadership?

5. Choose one of the following statements from the book, and write an essay about how it plays out throughout the story. Consider theme, plot, and character.

- Nora says: ““Emergencies changed all the rules.””
- Monica tells Nora: ““Be prepared for uncertainty.””

*Guide written by Bobbie Combs, a consultant at We Love Children's Books.*

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