



Best of All Worlds by Kenneth Oppel



THEMES

Conspiracies, Creation, Escape, Fact vs Fiction, Family, Freedom, Grief, Hope, Isolation, Paradise, Preconceptions, Racism, Reality vs Imagination, Religion, Science, The Climate Emergency, Trust

Book Club Questions

Chapters 1-6

I had to hand it to Nia—she ran a great apocalypse.

- **Who do you think would ‘run a great apocalypse’? Who would you want to be in charge in an apocalyptic situation?**

I’d grown up with blue dots: You are here. Behold, the blue dot travels with you wherever you go. You will never be lost or alone.

- **Do you think technology, in particular the tools that we have at our fingertips on our mobile phones, help people to feel more or less ‘lost and alone’?**
- **Consider all the ideas that the Oaks come up with to explain what has happened to them:**

Video screens have been placed around the cottage, the cottage has been moved, they have been kidnapped, relocation due to jury duty, they have died, they have been drugged, they are in a reality TV show, alien abduction.

Which scenario do you think is the most likely?

Which would you have suspected if you had been in their position?

Nia spent four months homesteading after university.

- **Which of the skills Nia gained from homesteading turn out to be most valuable inside the dome? What survival skills would be most important in an apocalyptic scenario?**

Chapters 7-12

The Oak family have now spent 3 years in the dome.

- **How have the family changed?**
- **What did Zay miss the most about his old life? What would you miss the most?**
- **What do you think he likes best about his new life? What would you like about it?**
- **Who do you think found it easiest to adapt to their new life?**

“First born in captivity,” I’d muttered.

- **Why does Zay describe Noah as a ‘precocious’ child?**
- **In what ways does growing up in the dome appear to have benefitted Noah?**

Pathetic as it was, in the last three years, my most intense and satisfying emotional experiences had been through music.

I have the best alien abduction playlist

- **Do you think music can create intense emotional experiences?**
- **What would be on your alien abduction playlist?**

It was probably all the gaming. Always needing to find a way in or out. Doors were everything. They made a promise to you: There’s something on the other side, something that might change your life.

- **Imagine a world without any doors. Would this be practical? Desirable?**

They had no idea how important that phone was to me. It was my journal, my heart’s pacemaker, my memory vault, and it had been cracked open and everything was lost.

- **What would life be like without phones?**

Zay snoops around the new house to try and find out about its inhabitants.

- **What would the contents of your home reveal about you and your family?**
- **What predictions do you have about the Jackson family based on the contents of their home?**
- **In what ways do you think they will be different from the Oak family?**

Chapters 13-19

“Tennessee. White people. Big attack dog. Guns.”

“That’s a lot of assumptions, Nia.”

She gave him a look. “Sometimes it’s best to make assumptions. Just in case.”

- **Is Nia right to make assumptions?**
- **What assumptions do you think the Jacksons make about the Oaks?**
- **How can preconceived ideas be dangerous?**

“My strength’s no good,” he said, pointing to his score of eleven.

- **Why is having a good strength score in Dungeons and Dragons so important to Noah?**
- **Is strength a necessary quality for a thriving community?**

“The climate emergency, the pandemic—these are just excuses to strip away our freedoms. To put us in places like this.”

- **To what extent should individual freedoms be restricted for the sake of public safety during global crises like pandemics or climate emergencies?**

“Mainstream media wouldn’t cover it,” said Riley. “But we overhear things in Corrections. The government’s set up lots of places like this.”

- **How do media narratives influence public perception of governments and emergency situations?**
- **Why do some people distrust government responses to global challenges? Is this distrust always unfounded?**

“Everything’s a conspiracy theory till it’s proven,” Charleze said.

- **What defines a conspiracy theory?**
- **How do we determine what is true in an age of misinformation?**

“Well, I am a huge fan of facts, and your theory seems a little light on them.”

- **Do you think Riley’s theory is founded in facts or beliefs?**

Chapters 20 - 26

They had blended the princess castle and farm and all their assorted toys into a complex feudal society with endless possibilities for drama.

- **How well have the Jacksons and Oaks 'blended' together in the dome?**

It confused me that she pushed back so hard against her parents' denial of climate change and pandemics, but she agreed with them about a deep government conspiracy.

- **Why is MacKenzie inclined to support her parents' theory about their captivity being the result of a government conspiracy?**
- **To what extent are our opinions and beliefs inherited from our parents/guardians?**
- **Which of the following do you think has the greatest influence, in terms of forming beliefs and opinions:
Family, friends, home, mainstream media, social media?**

While Riley is working on the balloon, his home loses power, the deep freeze stops working, birds attack the parachute and Alyssa is attacked by coyotes.

- **Do you think the Jacksons are being 'punished'?**
- **Should Riley have continued to work on the balloon?**
- **What other 'punishments' could 'they' have inflicted on the family?**

"So it's just too bad for Lucas if I found myself a bubble boyfriend."

- **Is Mackenzie being fair to Zay? To Lucas? To herself?**

"Have you ever thought you're kind of like Riley, not even admitting there might be other possibilities?"

"No. Because I know he's wrong."

- **In what ways are Riley and Nia similar?**

"Let's finish this balloon," I said.

- **What do you think is Zay's primary motivation in helping Riley with the balloon?**
- **What do you think the balloon represents to each character?**

Chapters 27– 33

Zay watched the midges heal Alyssa.

- **What do you think the midges are?
Could they be a figment of Zay’s imagination?**

What seemed like the tiniest possibility to me was total fact to Riley. His certainty was like an acid, and I didn’t want it eating away at my own.

- **In what ways can opinions and beliefs be ‘like an acid’?**

“Some people,” Nia said, “believe that deep government is planning a Great Surge where people of color pour into countries to make white folks extinct.”

- **Why do you think some people believe in the Great Surge theory?**

“It’s nothing racist,” Charleze hurried in ...

- **What stops some people from acknowledging that their ideas may be rooted in racism?**

“But people can change. If he stayed here with us, he’d eventually have a change of heart.”

- **To what extent do you agree with Caleb? Would Riley have changed his beliefs if he had stayed in the dome with the Oak family?**

“Be ready!” he shouted down to his family. “I’m coming back for you. I’m busting this whole place apart!”

....

“One-way trip,” he bellowed.

- **Do you think Riley intended to come back for his family? Or was he planning a suicide mission all along?**
- **What do you think happened to Riley?**
- **Why do you think they waited six months before holding a funeral for Riley?**
- **Why do you think Mackenzie asked Zay to come to the balloon launch?**

Reflecting on the whole story

- Which character in the story did you find the most infuriating? How closely do this character's views align with or differ from your own views?
- Who or what do you think is the true antagonist of the story?
(An Antagonist is the opposing force to the protagonist).
- To what extent do Nia and Riley represent opposing stereotypical archetypes?
- If Zay is right, and they have been rescued from earth and placed in a sanctuary, why do you think the Jacksons and Oaks were chosen to be saved?
- If another family were to arrive in the dome, what do you think they would be like? How many family members would there be? What would be their ages and genders? Would they have any pets? Where would they be from? What skills would they have?
- What does it mean to truly make the best of what you have?

I thought of Sam and Mom, how I'd never see them again. Never was a hard thing to accept. I hoped one day I could, or at least that it wouldn't hurt so much.

- Do you think Zay will ever accept that he will not see Sam or Mom again?

The concept of freedom

"There is nothing fair, nothing just, about this situation. But we haven't lost all our freedoms. Liberty of movement, yes. And that is huge. But you still have freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion . . ."

- What does the freedom mean to Riley? What does it mean to Caleb?
- Is freedom the absence of restrictions, or the ability to choose within limits?
- Can someone be free if they are heavily influenced or manipulated by others?

Gun control

In the USA, where the Jacksons live, citizens have a right to possess guns for the preservation of life, liberty and property. This is known as 'the right to bear arms.' This law does not apply in Canada, where the Oaks live.

- **Was Nia right to deny Riley this right when she took his ammunition?**
- **Was Zay right to return the ammunition to the Jacksons after the coyote attack?**

"We'll get your rifle," my father told him.

"No!" Nia said, giving Dad a look of hostility I'd never witnessed before. "I feel safer having some protection of my own."

- **Do you think Nia changed her perspective on guns throughout the story?**
- **Do you think possessing weapons is crucial for survival in the dome?**

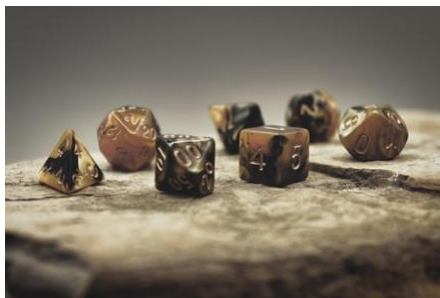
Consider the various biblical references in the story:

- **What is the significance of certain events happening after an interval of three or seven days?**
- **Do you think the 'punishments' were designed to reflect the plagues of Egypt?**

"Caleb was one of the twelve spies that Moses sent out to Canaan, to see if it could be the Promised Land."

- **To what extent does Caleb live up to his namesake?**
- **To what extent is the novel an analogy of the story of Noah's Ark?**

Dungeons and Dragons!



Dungeons and Dragons is an imaginative storytelling game. Players take on the role of characters and they collaborate to explore a fantasy world. They are guided through campaigns by a Dungeon Master. Zay is a massive fan of Dungeons and Dragons and when he wakes up at the start of chapter 1, he has come up with a plan to make progress in the game:

We'd been wasting our time trying to cross the moat, hopping on alligators' backs or crawling underwater with breathing tubes. We'd been bitten, pierced with arrows, and doused with boiling oil. Throcknor actually drowned because his plate armor (he was so proud of it) was incredibly heavy, and we had to use up a resurrection spell to bring him back.

What we needed to do was slog back to the village, break the Grygax out of its cage, feed it a goat so it liked us, and then I would straddle its mangy back and get it to fly me over the castle wall. Once inside, I'd open the gate, drop the bridge for the others, and we'd storm the keep. This would work.

- **Which elements of Zay's game plan foreshadow later events in the story?**

The ultimate aim of the game Dungeon's and Dragons is to tell a story.

- **How well does Zay tell the story of what happened to his family?
Would you have preferred to read the story from another character's perspective?**

*"So if this were a game, what's the first thing you'd do?"
"Figure out the rules," I said.*

- **Do you think Zay does figure out the rules?
What do you think the rules are?**

*In a game, you always have an objective...
I knew our objective: escape.*

The problem was, I didn't know their objective yet.

- **What do you think 'their' objective is?**

In D&D there were invisible walls; in the real world, no.

- **Do you agree or disagree with Zay? Are there invisible walls in the real world?**

In chapter 4, Zay, Caleb and Nia gather resources and select their weapons, much like players in a game.

- Nia picks a pitchfork
 - Caleb picks an axe
 - Zay picks a shovel.
- **Discuss the merits and limitations of each of these weapons.**

Noah had become obsessed with D&D and kept asking me to play. I made excuses.

- **Why do you think Zay does not want to play D&D with Noah?**

Noah is disappointed that his D&D strength score is low.

There are six attributes (ability scores) in D&D:

- Strength
 - Dexterity
 - Constitution
 - Wisdom
 - Charisma
 - Intelligence
- **Which of the characters in the story do you think would score the highest in each attribute?**

When I gamed, I could get into castles and escape from dungeons, swim a river out of a cave system or parachute down the chimney of an underground city.

- **Is there any evidence to suggest that the characters are in a giant D&D game?**

If so, who is the Dungeon Master?

Could it be Zay?

How much of what he imagines and wishes for, materialises in front of him?





Tips for Running a Best of All Worlds Book Club

Set the scene

- Create a *Best of All Worlds* book display. Include other recommended dystopian and speculative reads. *'If you liked this, then try ...'*. See book list below for inspiration.
- Snacks = Community. Who doesn't love a biscuit and a cuppa while enjoying their book chat?
- Create a themed playlist to set the tone for engaged chat. (E.g. *It's the End of the World As We Know It*, REM; *Mad World*, Gary Jules; *Video Games*, Lena Del Ray.)

The logistics

- Decide on timings for the sessions and stick to them. 40-45 minutes works well.
- Groups of 3-8 are ideal. If you have a larger group, consider splitting them into sub groups so that everybody has a chance to get involved.
- If the Book Club is going to run over several weeks, then end each one with a teaser question for the next session (for the group to think about in the meantime).
- Structure the sessions around a warm up question, deeper questions and debate, a creative/content activity and time for wrap up. But allow for flexibility so that the group can take the lead and explore ideas freely. You don't want it to feel too much like a lesson.
- Create a teen-led safe space to share thoughts – no pressure to speak, no wrong interpretations, no-one to dominate the chat.

Create debate

- Encourage quieter book clubbers to get involved with a two sides debate – split the room in half and each take a side.
- Aim for high energy so try quick fire questions inspired by the book. E.g. If you could ask Kenneth Oppel one question, what would it be?
- Keep it fun with activities like a 'cast the film' debate and an invitation to pitch sequel ideas – we all love to imagine what happens next 'off screen'.
- Ask book clubbers to select discussion questions that interest them from the **Book Club Questions** list.

Content is King!

- Write 3-word reviews for shelf-talkers or record 3-word reviews for socials.
- Create book club loyalty cards and book club member discounts.
- Share book club reviews via your newsletter



If you liked *Best of All Worlds* then try ...

- ***Under The Dome* by Stephen King:** An intriguing, epic thriller from the king of horror. On a beautiful autumn day, a small New England town is suddenly and inexplicably sealed off from the rest of the world by an invisible force field.
- ***The Bunker Diary* by Kevin Brook:** Linus wakes up in a cold, dark, underground bunker with no recollection of how he got there. A pulse-pounding exploration of what happens when your worst nightmare comes true - and how will you survive?
- ***Traumaland* by Josh Silver:** A thought-provoking psychological thriller. After a near-fatal accident, Eli winds up at Traumaland, an underground club where crowds of emotionally numb party-goers seek a new thrill.
- ***Divergent* by Veronica Roth:** One choice can transform you. For sixteen-year-old Tris, the world changes in a heartbeat when she is forced to make a terrible choice. A gripping dystopian tale.
- ***Escape Room* by Christopher Edge:** Twelve-year-old Ami can't wait to get started on the Ultimate Escape Room – But this is no ordinary game. A thrilling adventure that challenges readers to think about what they've done to save the world today.
- ***The Maze Runner* by James Dashner:** When the doors of the lift crank open, the only thing Thomas remembers is his first name. But he's not alone. And he has no idea what has happened to the world outside. An action-packed dystopian adventure.
- ***Shatter Me* by Tahereh Mafi:** Juliette hasn't touched anyone in exactly 264 days. She is Locked in a cell by The Reestablishment – a harsh dictatorship in charge of a crumbling world. A romantic and explosive fantasy tale.
- ***The Loneliest Girl in the Universe* by Lauren James:** Can you fall in love with someone you've never met, never even spoken to – someone who is light years away? A romantic and addictive thriller set in space, with a shocking twist.
- ***The Blue Book of Nebo* by Manon Steffan Ross:** Dylan was six when The End came, back in 2018; when the electricity went off for good, and the 'normal' 21st-century world he knew disappeared. A heart-warming post-apocalyptic tale of family survival.
- ***Apocalypse Cow* by O.R Sorrel:** Mel finds herself marooned after the apocalypse with her true love's boyfriend and a school bully. A wild and funny apocalyptic LGBTQ+ love story.

Author picks – three of Kenneth's Oppel's favourite stories:

- ***Room* by Emma Donoghue:** A powerful story of a mother and child kept in isolation.
- ***Jaws* by Peter Benchley:** You'll never look at the sea the same way again.
- ***Life of Pi* by Yann Martel:** One boy, one boat, one tiger.