

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Includes Questions, Classroom Activities, and an Exclusive Author Letter

ABOUT THE BOOK

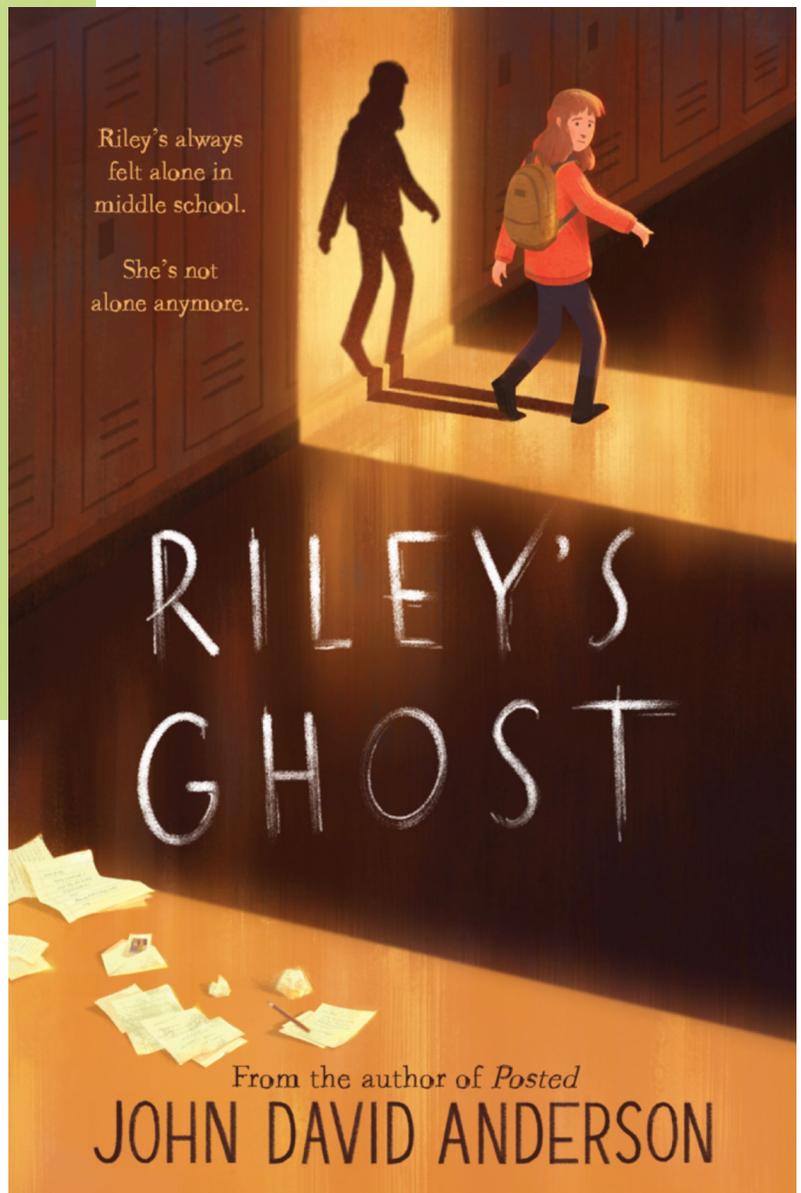
From the author of Posted comes a ghost story pulled from the darkest shadows of middle school—and a tale of one girl’s attempt to survive them.

Riley Flynn is alone.

It feels like she’s been on her own since sixth grade, when her best friend, Emily, ditched her for the cool girls. Girls who don’t like Riley. Girls who, on this particular day, decide to lock her in the science closet after hours, after everyone else has gone home.

When Riley is finally able to escape, however, she finds that her horror story is only just beginning. All the school doors are locked, the windows won’t budge, the phones are dead, and the lights aren’t working. Through halls lit only by the narrow beam of her flashlight, Riley roams the building, seeking a way out, an answer, an explanation. And as she does, she starts to suspect she isn’t alone after all.

While she’s always liked a good scary story, Riley knows there is no such thing as ghosts. But what else could explain the things happening in the school, the haunting force that seems to lurk in every shadow, around every corner? As she tries to find answers, she starts reliving moments that brought her to this night.





DEAR READER,

A good ghost story should stick with you long after the last page. It should haunt you.

I began writing *Riley's Ghost* out of a desire to try a new genre, harnessing a love of horror that I started cultivating at the age of twelve binging on Stephen King. I wanted to write a haunted house story akin to the kinds of gothic chillers you might find from the pen of Shirley Jackson, but with a decidedly contemporary, middle-grade twist. Hence a haunted house story...set in a middle school.

Of course, the deeper I dove into Riley's head and heart, the more this ghost story began to resemble something even more familiar and no less shiver-inducing: my own struggles with growing up. With finding friends, facing ridicule, feeling isolated and alone. The more I wrote, the more this became a coming-of-age story that happened to also be a ghost story. There is nothing scarier than having to grow up.

For me, at least, *Riley's Ghost* is more than just a haunted tale. It is ultimately a story about empathy. About making connections. About confronting our own fears and insecurities and finding ways to overcome them by opening up and sharing them with others. It's not an easy thing to do, letting ourselves be vulnerable. For some of us it is downright frightening—but it is one sure way that we can heal and learn and love and grow.

My hope is that *Riley's Ghost* inspires conversation—about how we can remember the past and learn from our mistakes so that we can treat each other with more kindness and respect. And how we can find the grace and compassion to forgive, not just those who have wronged us, but forgive ourselves for any hurt we might have caused so that we may move on, find peace, and be better. A good ghost story should haunt you forever, but ghosts themselves should be laid to rest.

Hope you enjoy the novel.

John David Anderson



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John David Anderson is the author of many highly acclaimed books for kids, including the *New York Times* Notable Book *Ms. Bixby's Last Day, Posted, Granted, One Last Shot*, and *Stowaway*. A dedicated root beer connoisseur and chocolate fiend, he lives with his wonderful wife, two fraawesome kids, and clumsy cat, Smudge, in Indianapolis, Indiana.

You can visit him online at www.johndavidanderson.org.



PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Before reading, ask students to think about the word empathy. What does it mean to be empathetic? Using words and images or drawings, have students create a poster (physical or digital) that demonstrates their understanding of the word. They might use pictures of people they consider empathetic, draw a scene that represents what empathy means to them, or include definitions or quotations about empathy. Have students share and compare their posters.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 From the moment we meet Riley, she is very clear about what she thinks of middle school and her classmates. She says that in middle school, “mean and stupid came with the territory.” [PAGE 12] What does she mean? What does her observation tell you about Riley as a character? Do you agree with what she says?
- 2 Describe Riley’s home situation, including her relationships with her parents. Riley is often in a position where she must take care of herself. How do you think she’s doing? In what ways is Riley cared for? In what ways is she neglected? By others? By herself?
- 3 When thinking about how she broke her phone, Riley says she “reacted in typical Riley fashion, doing something that only ended up hurting herself.” [PAGE 21] Find other examples in the book of Riley reacting and only hurting herself. What do these moments have in common?
- 4 Make a list of all the adults in the novel. What is the impact of each one on Riley? When kids like Riley are struggling, they’re often told to seek help from the adults in their life. How are the adults in Riley’s life supportive? How do they make her struggle worse?
- 5 When Riley visits the library after school, she smiles “for the first time all day.” [PAGE 32] Why? What’s different or special about Riley’s time in the library? What spaces or activities help you feel better after a bad day? What is it about them makes you feel happy or safe?
- 6 Discuss the bullying and harassment that Riley experiences. What motivates her classmates’ casual cruelty? In what ways does Riley push back against her treatment? In what ways has Riley internalized some of her bullies’ words?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 7 During the entire incident between Riley and Grace that ends with Riley locked in the science room closet, Emily stands by and does nothing to help, despite being uncomfortable with Grace's actions. What do you think about this? Why does Emily do nothing to intervene? What other choices could she have made? What might you have done in her place?
- 8 Max says Heather wants Riley for something. Why? What is it about Riley that draws Heather's ghost to her? What does Heather's haunting of Riley tell us about Riley as a character, and about her struggles?
- 9 Discuss Max and Emily. What parallels can you draw between them as characters? What are the motivations for their choices and behavior? How do their actions affect Riley and create narrative conflict? Use evidence from the book to support your thinking.
- 10 When Riley asks her father what ghosts have to be afraid of, he replies, "Same thing as everybody...they're afraid of being forgotten." [PAGE 129] Think about Max and Heather. How do they fear being forgotten, and how does that fear impact Riley?
- 11 Riley's dad also says that ghost stories are about loss. What does he mean by this, and do you agree? How is this novel—a story about Riley as well as a ghost story—about loss? Use the text to support your answer.
- 12 Go back to the poster you created on empathy. What is the role of empathy in the novel? How does empathy or the lack thereof drive the narrative and create or resolve conflict? How does it shape the characters' relationships with each other, positively or negatively?
- 13 What is a friend? What are the qualities of a good friend? How does friendship relate to empathy in the novel? Where in the text do you see examples of characters being good friends?
- 14 Who is this novel's antagonist? How does Riley's conflict with the antagonist drive both the story and Riley's development as a character forward? Explain your thinking with evidence from the text. Is there more than one antagonist?
- 15 Describe Riley at the beginning of the book and again at the end. How does she change? What has brought about these changes? Use examples from the text to support your thinking. What parts of Riley's experiences or perspective resonate with you the most?



ACTIVITIES

A Theme on a Theme

There are many themes that can be found throughout *Riley's Ghost*. Begin by reviewing the concept of themes. What are they? Why do authors use them? How do they help the progression of a story? Next, identify some of the themes in *Riley's Ghost*, and choose one to explore in a small group. Each group will creatively represent their chosen theme and give examples from the story to show how it is used throughout the book. Groups can use any medium to share their theme: TikTok videos, songs, playlists, writing, collage, etc.

Flip the Script!

When Riley's attempts to de-escalate her confrontation with Grace fail and things get physical, Emily is in a position to do something to help, but stays quiet. But what if she chose to stand up to Grace instead? In pairs, take a look at the "Bystanders to Bullying" page on StopBullying.gov for ways to be an upstander instead of a bystander. Rewrite the scene between Riley and Grace, but with Emily taking action to intervene. Pairs can perform their new scenes for the rest of the class.

Connection Reflection

Think about the moments in the narrative when a character feels seen or understood by others. How do these moments affect the character? How do they affect the narrative? Keep a paper or digital journal for a week. Write down whenever you feel seen or understood by someone else, even for something small. How did it make you feel?

How does this kind of connection affect your day or your mood? How might someone feel if they never felt a connection with others? Write or record your thoughts with examples in the book as well as from real life.

How to Deal with a Bully

Riley mentions a lot of strategies for handling her anger or dealing with classmates' unkindness. She also talks about how they don't really work for her or how they don't actually address the problem. Think about some of the advice you've heard about handling bullying and bullies and make a list. What actually works? What doesn't and why? In small groups, make a bully survival guide. Be sure to include some busted bully myths as well as good strategies for people being targeted. Groups can use any medium to share their guide.

Mind over Matter

Riley is very open in talking about her difficulties in controlling her moods and her outbursts. She, and other kids who approach stressful circumstances the same way, might benefit from some simple Mindfulness practices.

Mindful.org offers some Mindfulness for Kids activities, such as "An Appreciation Practice for Children."

As a whole class, or in small groups, ask students to contemplate things in their lives that they appreciate. After doing this activity and comparing results, ask the class how Riley might respond to these prompts.



FURTHER RESOURCES

-  What Not to Say When Your Child Is Being Bullied (Huffington Post)

[HTTPS://WWW.HUFFPOST.COM/ENTRY/WHAT-NOT-SAY-WHEN-CHILD-BULLIED_L_5D5635DBE4B0EB875F217F04](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-not-say-when-child-bullied_l_5d5635dbe4b0eb875f217f04)

-  6 Things Not To Say To Someone Being Bullied (Bustle)

[HTTPS://WWW.BUSTLE.COM/ARTICLES/116010-6-THINGS-NOT-TO-SAY-TO-SOMEONE-WHOS-BEING-BULLIED](https://www.bustle.com/articles/116010-6-things-not-to-say-to-someone-whos-being-bullied)

-  StopBullying.gov

[HTTPS://WWW.STOPBULLYING.GOV](https://www.stopbullying.gov)

-  Youth Mental Health (Mental Health America)

[HTTPS://WWW.MHANATIONAL.ORG/CHILDRENS-MENTAL-HEALTH](https://www.mhanational.org/childrens-mental-health)

-  Mindfulness for Kids

[HTTPS://WWW.MINDFUL.ORG/MINDFULNESS-FOR-KIDS](https://www.mindful.org/mindfulness-for-kids)

-  Teacher's Guide: Empathy (Grades 6-8) (KidsHealth)

[HTTPS://KIDSHEALTH.ORG/CLASSROOM/6TO8/PERSONAL/GROWING/EMPATHY.PDF](https://kidshealth.org/classroom/6to8/personal/growing/empathy.pdf)

-  Empathy Fatigue: How Stress and Trauma Can Take a Toll on You (Cleveland Clinic)

[HTTPS://HEALTH.CLEVELANDCLINIC.ORG/EMPATHY-FATIGUE-HOW-STRESS-AND-TRAUMA-CAN-TAKE-A-TOLL-ON-YOU](https://health.clevelandclinic.org/empathy-fatigue-how-stress-and-trauma-can-take-a-toll-on-you)

-  Six Ways for Educators to Avoid Compassion Fatigue (Lesley University)

[HTTPS://LESLEY.EDU/ARTICLE/SIX-WAYS-FOR-EDUCATORS-TO-AVOID-COMPASSION-FATIGUE](https://lesley.edu/article/six-ways-for-educators-to-avoid-compassion-fatigue)

This Discussion Guide was written by Anastasia Collins (she/her/hers) who holds an M.S. in LIS and an M.A. in Children's Literature. She is the Research & Instruction Librarian for Children's Literature at the Simmons University Library. She is also the author of the Simmons Anti-Oppression Guide. Outside of librarianship, Stacy is a children's literature scholar and reviewer with *Kirkus Reviews* and *Horn Book Magazine* as well as a trauma-informed facilitator with the Anti-Racism Collaborative of Massachusetts. You can follow her online at [@DarkLiterata](https://twitter.com/DarkLiterata).