



HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Riverland is a powerful novel about storytelling, secrets, sisterhood, and survival. Pushing back on popular media portrayals of children living in violent households, *Riverland*'s sister duo, Eleanor and Mike (Mary, but only her father calls her that), become heroes in their own adventure and learn to rescue themselves in the process.

In the meantime, *Riverland*'s incorporation of dreams, memory, friendship, and imagination in the context of a mixed contemporary and fantasy setting allow for exploration and discussion along numerous tracks.

The issues in *Riverland* are weighty and timely, and perfect to discuss with ten- to fourteen-year-old readers. The portal-fantasy format with realistic contemporary portrayals of Eleanor and Mike's experiences, alternating with their efforts to keep the dream river from falling apart, offer both contextual and metaphorical ways to discuss both tough topics and the connection between dreams and reality. As a result, *Riverland* is an excellent choice for a classroom text, literature circle, book club, or reading list.

The discussion questions in this guide are based on Common Core standards and include language arts and STEAM crossover activities. There are chapter-by-chapter questions as well as big-picture questions, writing prompts, and fun glass science and ecological activity prompts.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS – Chapter Breakout

Chapter 1: House Magic Rules

- When readers first see Eleanor's house, it looks perfect, inside and out, but Eleanor is reluctant to let friends in. How might this contradiction ask readers to consider how perceptions can differ from what is real? What strategies does Eleanor use to try and steer her best friend, Pendra, away from Pendra's goal of visiting the house. Why might Eleanor do that? (CCSS.RL.3)
- How does Mike's understanding of house magic differ from Eleanor's? What about Pendra's understanding of house magic? What objects do each of them associate with house magic? (CCSS.RL.1)
- Eleanor explains to Pendra that she and Mike read under her bed—including the book Pendra's loaned to them—when Mike can't sleep. They also tell stories under the bed. What's so important about that space for Eleanor? What does it reveal about her relationship with her sister? How do stories help both girls? (CCSS.RL.1)

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Chapter 2: Consequences

- Mike and Eleanor’s relationship isn’t always perfect. There are a lot of forces that pull on them and push them against each other besides normal sibling stuff. What are some of the forces and how do they deal with them? (CCSS.RL.1)
- “Consequences” is a pretty scary chapter in part because the adults are acting more like characters in one of Eleanor’s stories. This is scary for Eleanor and Mike, too. When Eleanor tries to protect Mike by telling her more stories, Mike asks for even scarier stories. Why would Mike do that? (CCSS.RL.2)
- When the witch ball—a family heirloom—breaks, Eleanor thinks she hears something like hoofbeats in the silence that follows. What might she realistically be hearing? Why would she think of hoofbeats? (CCSS.RL.6)
- Does the witch ball breaking on the same night as a dream river appears beneath the bed seem more like a consequence or a coincidence? What’s the difference between the two? (CCSS.RL.3)

Chapter 3: The River

- The dream river feels quite real to Mike and Eleanor from the very beginning. What sensory details contribute to this? (CCSS.RL.4)
- How does Eleanor get her bearings? If you had to figure out where you were, what tools and knowledge would you use? What knowledge does Eleanor use to help Mike as she struggles? (CCSS.RL.2)
- A heron made of beach glass and driftwood explains to Mike and Eleanor that dreams grow along the river. Then it shows them a baby dream. Where do you think dreams come from? What purpose do dreams serve in the story and in real life? (CCSS.RL.1)

Chapter 3: The River (continued)

- Mike and Eleanor encounter nightmares and a monster in this chapter. What are the nightmares made of? Part of making monsters in fiction is figuring out how they can be changed, avoided, or defeated. How might you change, avoid, or defeat one of the Riverland monsters? (CCSS.RL.3)
- The Heron is a pretty strange guide. It is kind of nice, but not always. Why do you think that is? What is the difference between niceness and trustworthiness? Do guides always need to be nice? Why or why not? (CCSS.RL.2)

Chapter 4: The Lighthouse

- Apart from the water under the bed, the light from the lighthouse was the first thing Eleanor saw of the dream river. Why would the lighthouse be an interesting object to have special properties? (CCSS.RL.3)
- Eleanor makes a promise, in part to try to help her sister, but also because she still hopes this is a dream she’ll wake up from. What does she do next? Why is this significant in terms of the book? (CCSS.RL.3)

Chapter 5: Broken Things

- Eleanor discovers that Pendra’s book was not magicked and reacts with frustration and anger. She tries to control it by counting to ten, but it doesn’t work. Eleanor is often being told to control her temper. Why might she have a hard time understanding her feelings and working through them? What are some of your favorite methods for working through feelings that others might label difficult? (CCSS.RL.2)

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Chapter 5: Broken Things (continued)

- Eleanor and Mike’s mom decides to take them to their grandmother, whom they’ve not spent much time with. This journey feels a little like a quest to both Mike and Eleanor. How do they express that in the car? What are they searching for on this quest? (CCSS.RL.1)

Chapter 6: Best Behavior

- Gran’s idea of best behavior and Momma’s are different. How do we first discover that? What might “best behavior” look like to you? (CCSS.RL.1)
- Mike and Eleanor find several things at Gran’s. What do they find? What do the sisters each think they are? What does Gran think they are? How do these differences reveal about each character? (CCSS.RL.1)
- In the motel room, Mike can’t sleep. Why? How does Eleanor help? (CCSS.RL.1)
- Why do Eleanor and Mike initially think house magic worked when they return home? What are the specific items that tell them it has and hasn’t? (CCSS.RL.1)
- What do Eleanor and Mike decide to do? Would you decide differently? Why or why not? (CCSS.RL.3)

Chapter 7: Returns

- Eleanor is finally able to give Pendra her book back, but Pendra wants more answers. What does Pendra want her to do? What about their friend Aja? What do you think Eleanor should do? (CCSS.RL.3)

Chapter 7: Returns (continued)

- When they make up, Eleanor and Pendra discuss more options for their science project, including the magic of glass. Eleanor had talked about this topic with Mr. Divner, but Pendra’s interest in glass magic stems from what object? What other aspects of glass does Mr. Divner propose for their research? (CCSS.RL.3)
- Eleanor tells Pendra that Mr. Divner’s binoculars got broken, but that Mike didn’t do it, which helps ease the tension in their friendship. The book’s been returned, too, and the birthday party and the science project are both going ahead. But the dream river is still leaking into Eleanor and Mike’s house. Why might that be happening? (CCSS.RL.1)
- What about glass fascinates Eleanor? What do you think the magic of glass is? Why? (CCSS.RL.1)

Chapter 8: The Raft

- Eleanor and Mike voluntarily return to the dream river. Who do they discover there? (CCSS.RL.3)
- Dishrag, the Chincoteague Pony made of old towels, seems caught between being a dream and a nightmare. What is he missing? Does he make a better guide than the Heron? Why or why not? (CCSS.RL.1)
- Eleanor gets angry at one of the crabs, then feels terrible, but the crab tells her that there’s good mad and bad mad. What’s the difference between the two? How does knowing this help Eleanor? (CCSS.RL.1)

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Chapter 9: The Tunnels

- What are the crabs doing in Riverland? (CCSS.RL.3)
- What does Eleanor discover are helpful tools to deal with her anger and other feelings, including guilt about being angry? What does Mike discover? What does this make you think about how emotions might be handled? (CCSS.RL.3)
- So many things in the dream world are made of recycled parts—old towels, driftwood, pieces of metal, mirrors and smoke. Even glass is made up of other things. What might these things reveal about the nature of the river, and of dreams? (CCSS.RL.4)
- When the lighthouse light can't get them home, Eleanor and Mike have to improvise. Who helps them? Why? (CCSS.RL.3)

Chapter 10: Floods

- Pendra is worried about her friend but has interpreted Eleanor's standoffishness as being mad at her. Why might Pendra think so? Meanwhile, all Eleanor wants is for everything to be back to normal. How does Pendra help her? (CCSS.RL.1)
- What do Pendra and Eleanor discover about glass? What does Eleanor realize about her research and how it might help her later in the tunnels? (CCSS.RL.1)
- Water starts leaking at school, too. At first, this seems to be a broken pipe, at least in the upper school. But in the lower school, Mike seems to be in trouble. How does Eleanor react? Why? (CCSS.RL.3)

Chapter 11: The Rocks

- The adults in this chapter aren't helping Mike and Eleanor at all. They are, in fact, being pretty scary. Eleanor decides that fixing the leaks in the house is a good way to try to make things better. But before they can do so, they are confronted by Anassa, who makes Eleanor an offer. Eleanor resists, despite Anassa's words, because she realizes Anassa's lying. How does she know? (CCSS.RL.1)
- One of Anassa's favorite things to tell Eleanor is that she's not a good person. This is something Eleanor worries about herself, as well, so Anassa's words hurt her a lot. How does Eleanor find the strength to resist what others tell her about herself? How does Mike help? (CCSS.RL.3)
- In both the dream world and in their house, negative statements are used to weaken and control other people. This is a form of abuse that doesn't often appear on popular media, at least not as often as physical violence. It's harmful and can be a precursor to physical danger. Eleanor is learning that pretending these things don't hurt helps weaken the dream world. What should she do next?
- How do the sisters help Zöe be brave? (CCSS.RL.1)
- In many fantastical quests—whether fairy tales or *The Hobbit*—the heroes have to overcome challenges, both internal and external, in order to triumph. What are some of the challenges that Eleanor and Mike have overcome so far? What do they still need to do? (CCSS.RL.9)

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Chapter 12: Like Glass

- When Eleanor and Pendra give their presentation, Eleanor finds her storytelling strengths help her in front of the class, too. What strengths do you have from school that help you outside of class? What strengths do you have with your friends and family that help in school? (CCSS.RL.2)
- What does *amorphous* mean? How is glass different from other solids? Why is this important as both a scientific fact and a metaphor in *Riverland*? (CCSS.RL.4)
- When the fixes Eleanor thought she was putting in place are discovered, there are several different consequences. What do Eleanor and Mike each decide to do? What happens instead? (CCSS.RL.3)
- The sisters try to escape to the river, but it isn't under the bed. Instead, they have to stay in the real world. How do they cope? What does Gran's arrival mean to them? (CCSS.RL.3)

Chapter 13: Dinner Rules

- Gran seems to have special powers over Poppa. What are they? (CCSS.RL.1)
- What is the significance of Gran telling Eleanor and Mike, "That wasn't angry," and that Eleanor isn't like her father? (CCSS.RL.2)
- Eleanor and Mike have more hints that Gran once knew about Riverland, but they can't find out more without breaking house rules. Gran, too seems to be trying to help them, but can't quite make the connection. Meantime, Poppa is trying to keep everyone separated. Are there similar moments on the dream river where characters who might help each other can't see clear ways to do so, while other characters actively get in the way? What solutions might you find for either situation?

Chapter 13: Dinner Rules (continued)

- What decision does Eleanor make for herself? (CCSS.RL.1)

Chapter 14: Sleepover Rules

- When the river follows Eleanor to the sleepover, she has new and different problems. What are they? (CCSS.RL.1)
- Pendra's curiosity leads her into the dreamworld, but there's a big risk for her, foreshadowed by another character's story. Who is that character, and how does the foreshadowing help a reader to understand Pendra's situation? (CCSS.RL.3)
- When Eleanor confronts Anassa, the monster uses many abusive tricks, including fear and threats. Eleanor finds bravery and strength in her friendships and by fighting for herself and her sister. When Anassa drops the witch ball, Eleanor thinks she's lost. What do you think might happen? (CCSS.RL.2)

Chapter 15: Homecoming

- Eleanor helps Pendra escape the dream world just in time, but has to reveal a secret in order to do so. How does this impact her friendship with Pendra? (CCSS.RL.3)
- When she discovers that the nightmares have Mike, Eleanor struggles to help Mike remember what's most important. The nightmares try to turn their fears and failures into nightmare-power, but Eleanor finds a way to fight back. But they're still trapped in the dreamworld. Who help the sisters remain strong? (CCSS.RL.3)
- Even the Heron feels defeated, until Eleanor turns the tables, using the power of stories, especially true stories, and the magic of glass. What begins to happen? (CCSS.RL.1)

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Chapter 16: Water and Wind

- While Eleanor and Mike have overcome so much, the nightmares have still crossed over into the real world, along with Anassa, and a storm is coming. Why does Poppa demand they stay in the house? How does Eleanor convince Momma to let them go to shelter? (CCSS.RL.3)
- What does Pendra do that helps them know they're not isolated? How do friends support each other in stressful situations? (CCSS.RL.1)
- An old myth about witch balls is that they could be used to trap bad spirits and protect a house. How do Eleanor and Mike use their new witch balls? (CCSS.RL.1)

Chapter 16: Water and Wind (continued)

- What's important about the final story Eleanor decides to tell? (CCSS.RL.2)

Chapter 17: Memory

- What's significant about Pendra's gift to Eleanor? (CCSS.RL.3)
- The last line of this chapter is "Mike and I knew sometimes magic worked this way." What does this mean, in light of the story? (CCSS.RL.1)

BIG PICTURE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- There are many different types of heroes in stories. What kind of heroes are Mike and Eleanor? What specifically makes them heroic? (CCSS.RL.9)
- What point is made about the power of storytelling? What happens in the story that highlights this idea? (CCSS.RL.2)
- What objects are most important in Mike Eleanor's world? How do you know the objects are significant to the story? (CCSS.RL.1)
- How is the idea of secrets handled in this story? (CCSS.RL.2)
- What theme is developed about dealing with emotions? What events in the story make this theme clear? (CCSS.RL.2)
- Riverland as a setting is an essential component of this story. How does it shape the plot of the story as well as the way Mike and Eleanor change? (CCSS.RL.2)
- How does the relationship between Eleanor and Mike change as the plot unfolds? What are specific ways their relationship changes? How are these changes reflected in the structure of the book? (CCSS.RL.5)
- How do the stories that Mike and Eleanor tell during the book evolve? Can you give some examples? (CCSS.RL.3)
- There are breakout sections of dialogue at the start, middle, and end of *Riverland* when Eleanor and Mike are telling stories. They're in a much different style than the rest of the book, almost as if they're being whispered beneath a bed or in the dark. How does the quietness of these sections impact your understanding of what is happening? How do you like to tell stories best? How would you portray that in a book? (CCSS.RL.5)
- What metaphors-made-real can you find in *Riverland*? Why might they be important? (CCSS.RL.4)

BIG PICTURE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Ecology and life cycles are important to the story, too. Some of the life cycles discussed are those of dreams and nightmares. How are dreams and nightmares classified? (CCSS.RL.4)
- The discussion of abuse and violence in *Riverland* is an important and nuanced one. The characters are trying to keep themselves safe and following a set of rules in order to do so, but one of those rules is to not talk about what's happening. Meanwhile, from the outside, everything looks perfect. Consider stories you've seen or read about the topic and compare how this story relates to other stories you know. (CCSS.RL.9)
- *Riverland* deals with the topic of a violent household from the perspective of one of the children. This makes Eleanor and Mike the protagonists and heroes of their story, even though they struggle with anger and guilt. How do they learn to overcome their situations? (CCSS.RL.2)
- Sometimes people (adults especially) try to make tough things look better—whether by applying filters for perfect photos, or by making up stories. How might this sometimes make things worse? When are stories useful and when are they harmful? (CCSS.RL.2)

CLASSROOM EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

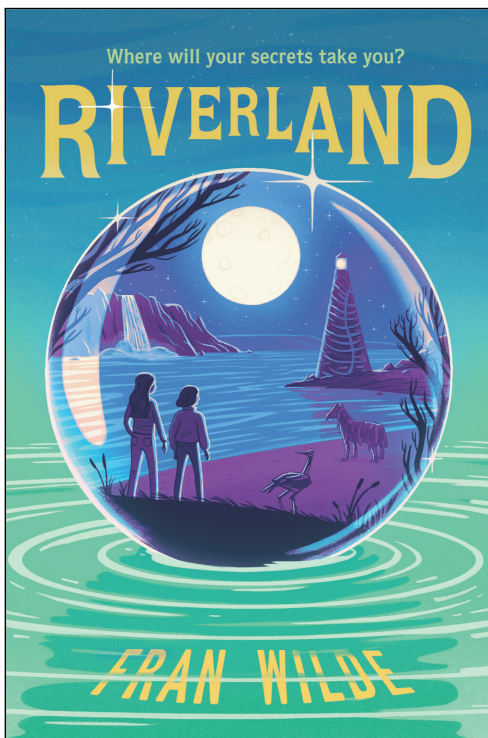
- Ask students to research glass and then present their findings to the class. Did they discover anything that surprised them?
- Have students draw a witch ball or make one out of wire and saran wrap. Ask them what they would want to trap inside of their witch ball.
- A life cycle is a series of stages that an organism or object passes through. For instance, a butterfly's life cycle includes egg, caterpillar, chrysalis, and butterfly. Challenge students to depict the lifecycle of a dream from *Riverland*.
- *Riverland* has familiar features to those found along the Chesapeake Bay, although some things are very different. Have students to make a model of the ecology of *Riverland*.
- Using discarded or used things like old towels, invite students to create your own *Riverland* creature or structure—a lighthouse, a dream or nightmare, a monster, or a bird.
- Share information on what psychologists believe dreams are with students. Ask them if they notice any overlap with *Riverland*?
- Maps are as important to *Riverland* as magic. Here's a copy of the map the author, Fran Wilde, drew when she was writing her book:



Invite students draw their own map for this story, and encourage them to incorporate maps into their own storytelling.

RIVERLAND

Fran Wilde



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Ages 8-12

PRAISE

★ *"A narrative that challenges the stereotypical stories of domestic violence, Riverland is painful and heartwarming all at once . . . A must-read."*

—Booklist

★ *"Wilde approaches the difficult subjects of domestic violence and emotional abuse with the care and respectful treatment that they deserve, using the fantastic to symbolize and illuminate the complex emotions her characters experience. About courage and truth overcoming denial and fear, Riverland is an important book."*

—Shelf Awareness

ABOUT THE BOOK

When things go bad at home, sisters Eleanor and Mike hide in a secret place under Eleanor's bed, telling monster stories. Often, it seems those stories and their mother's house magic are all that keep them safe from both busybodies and their dad's temper. But when their father breaks a family heirloom—a glass witch ball—a river suddenly appears beneath the bed, and Eleanor and Mike fall into a world where dreams are born, nightmares struggle to break into the real world, and secrets have big consequences. Full of both adventure and heart, *Riverland* is a story about the bond between two sisters and how they must make their own magic to protect each other and save the ones they love.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A former programmer, poet, teacher, and engineering/science writer, Fran Wilde is the award-winning author of the Bone Universe trilogy, which won the Andre Norton Award and the Compton Crook Award. She lives in Philadelphia with her husband, daughter, dog, and a LOUD parakeet. Find her on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and at franwilde.net.