



MARGARET FERGUSON BOOKS

AFTER THE WORST THING HAPPENS by Audrey Vernick

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About the Book

Left reeling after her thoughtless mistake causes a terrible accident, twelve-year-old Army Morand channels her grief to help someone in need.

Army Morand feels like her life is ruined when the worst thing imaginable happens—her beloved dog dies. It was an accident, but it was also Army's fault. Now she can't seem to stop hiding from everything.

But then Army sees Madison, the little girl who moved in across the way, climbing a tree, and walking down the street unsupervised. Her family is not neglectful, just overwhelmed. Army finds herself overcome with the need to help Madison's family to make sure another worst thing doesn't happen.

Classroom Discussion

- What is a *good neighbor*? Describe Army's relationship with the people in her neighborhood. How is she an especially good neighbor to Mr. and Mrs. Rooney and to Mr. Hoffart? Explain why Army likes being a "secret part of everyday life" (p. 6). What does this reveal about her character?
- Contrast Army's relationship with her mom and dad. How does her dad show more understanding than her mom? Her mom doesn't really discuss feelings with Army after Maybe dies. In what other ways does Army's mom struggle with expressing feelings? Army's parents own a company called "Never Happened" that helps people who are victims of disasters. What prompts Army to ask her parents if their business depresses them? How do her parents respond?
- Army is grieving the death of her dog, Maybe. Why is her mom so quick to remove Maybe's things? How does this make Army's grieving process more difficult? Navy, Army's little brother, retrieves Maybe's things from the garbage. What does this reveal about him? Why does Army steal the picture



of Maybe from her classmate Elsie Jenkins's house? Why is she so surprised to later learn that Elsie was aware that she took it? What does Elsie teach Army about grief?

- Army says that her parents think that the worst thing someone can do is to stick their nose in someone else's business. Debate whether helping Madison is sticking her nose in the family's business. Explain how Army's mom reacts to her daughter's desire to help Madison. How does Madison's mom, Irene, grow to depend on Army? Why does Irene call Army an "army of one"?
- Describe Army's friendship with JennaLouise. Discuss how Army becomes friends with Elsie Jenkins. Why does Army call Elsie "persistent"? How is JennaLouise jealous of Elsie? What does Elsie bring to a friendship that JennaLouise doesn't? Why does Army think that Elsie is like a "little business woman"?
- Why do Army and JennaLouise call Elsie by her first and last name? At what point does Army begin calling her by just her first name. Army makes reference to Johnny on the Spot, a man who gathers people's garbage. Elsie calls him Mr. Elkton. Why is Army embarrassed that she doesn't know his real name? How does Elsie help Army understand that name-calling and labels are mean?
- Discuss what Army learns about autism from Madison. Explain what Irene means when she says, "It's a very strange and hard-to-see line between what Madison needs and what the world says is okay" (p. 116). What gives Army the idea to get a service dog for Madison? Army realizes that Madison loves high places. How does creative thinking and the desire to help offer safety to Madison until her family can get a service dog?
- Explain why Army is so surprised that her mom agrees to two dogs from Service with a Wag. Debate whether this is the beginning of a different kind of relationship between Army and her mom.
- Discuss the title of the book. What is the first worst thing that happens? Discuss the obvious and the more subtle "worst things" that happen in the book. How do these things combine to lead to a satisfying and hopeful conclusion?

Guide prepared by Pat Scales, retired school librarian and independent consultant, Greenville, South Carolina.

About the Author



Audrey Vernick, author of *After the Worst Thing Happens*, has written many picture books, including *First Grade Dropout*; *Brothers at Bat*; and *Bob, Not Bob*, which was co-authored with Liz Garton Scanlon. She also writes middle-grade fiction: *Water Balloon* and *Screaming at the Ump*, as well as *Two Naomis and Naomis Too*, co-authored with Olugbemisola Rhuday-Perkovich. Audrey received a 2019 fellowship from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.

