

Sometimes you need to lose something
in order to find yourself.

FINDING ORION



by John David Anderson

Rion Kwirk comes from a rather odd family. His mother named him and his sisters after her favorite constellations, and his father makes funky-flavored jelly beans for a living. One sister acts as if she's always onstage, and the other is a walking dictionary. But no one in the family is more odd than Rion's grandfather, Papa Kwirk.

He's the kind of guy who shows up on his motorcycle only on holidays, handing out crossbows and stuffed squirrels as presents. Rion has always been fascinated by Papa Kwirk, especially since his son—Rion's father—is the complete opposite. Where Dad is predictable, nerdy, and reassuringly boring, Papa Kwirk is mysterious, dangerous, and cool.

Which is why, when Rion and his family learn of Papa Kwirk's death and pile into the car to attend his funeral and pay their respects, Rion can't help but feel that that's not the end of the story. That there's so much more to Papa Kwirk to discover.

He doesn't know how right he is.

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AN EDUCATOR'S
GUIDE FOR
CLASSROOM USE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John David Anderson is the author of some of the most beloved and highly acclaimed books for kids in recent memory, including the *New York Times* Notable Book *Ms. Bixby's Last Day*, *Posted*, *Granted*, *Sidekicked*, and *The Dungeoneers*. A dedicated root beer connoisseur and chocolate fiend, he lives with his wonderful wife and two frausome kids in Indianapolis, Indiana. He's never eaten seven scoops of ice cream in a single sitting, but he thinks it sounds like a terrific idea. You can visit him online at:

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DISCUSSION GUIDE

- 1** The book begins: “The night we found out about Papa Kwirk, I had a jelly bean for dinner.” What was your first impression when you read this sentence? What did you think the story was going to be about? Looking back after finishing the book, discuss how this opening sentence sets the tone for the story.
- 2** Consider the quotes by Arthur Schopenhauer and about Sir Christopher Wren that open this book. (The quote about Wren translates as: “Reader, if you seek a monument, look around you.”) How do they relate to the story?
- 3** Mr. Kwirk is a scientist who makes jelly beans for a living and Mrs. Kwirk is the director at a planetarium. Which of Rion’s parents would you want to visit at work?
- 4** “I didn’t know what I would do. Hard to tell what your legacy is going to be when you don’t even know what you’re good at. What sets you apart.” (page 62) Because of his grandfather’s death, Rion becomes interested in the idea of legacy, and what people leave behind when they’re gone. As a group, discuss the concept of legacy. List some people whose legacies you admire. What would want your own legacy to be? What mark would you want to leave on the people around you, or on the world?
- 5** Discuss why Papa Kwirk felt so strongly about having a “funneral” instead of a funeral. What are some differences between the two? In what ways did people in the town honor Papa Kwirk’s wishes? (For example, on page 110, Rion notices that nobody tells him they’re sorry for his loss.)
- 6** There are lots of pop culture references in this story, from X-Men and *Duck Tales* to *Hamilton* and Elvis. Why do you think pop culture, especially cartoons, plays such a large role in Rion’s father’s life? What TV shows/ music/ movies/ books/ theater do you think you will look back on and remember as shaping your childhood when you’re an adult? What theme songs would you be humming in the car, like Mr. Kwirk?
- 7** As the story progresses and the mystery unfolds, the Kwirks find out that a very different version of Papa Kwirk exists in each of their memories. Discuss the ways in which Papa Kwirk seemed like a different person to each member of his family and to the people in his town.
- 8** Mr. Kwirk is a scientist, and he approaches life in a very scientific manner. What are some examples of this that we see in the story? How has his scientific mindset helped or hindered him in life?

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DISCUSSION GUIDE CONTINUED

- 9** Mr. Oglesby has *Semper Fidelis* tattooed on his arm. What does *Semper Fidelis* mean? Why does Mrs. Kwirk immediately know what branch of the armed forces he served in from seeing this tattoo?
- 10** Discuss poor Beelzebub the ferret's funeral. How does this event connect to other parts of the story?
- 11** "'That's the funny thing about stars,' Mom continued.... 'They burn so bright, with such intensity, and yet you can't even see them most of the time. They're hidden. It's only when everything gets dark, the darker the better. Then you realize — they were out here all along.'" (page 331) Discuss the importance of this moment between Rion and his mother.
- 12** "'You know... I'm just so... ordinary'" (page 336). Throughout the story Rion Kwirk laments that his family is weird, and he doesn't belong. Discuss why he feels this way, and what these feelings say about his perception of himself. How does he come to terms with the rest of the Kwirks as the story progresses? How does his father help him see what makes him unique?
- 13** "You can look for the picture of my family. The Kwirks. I'm the one in the middle, rolling my eyes and shaking my head, trying way too hard to act normal. Surrounded by something extraordinary." (page 352). How do these last lines of the book wrap up Rion's adventure?
- 14** What feelings and images does the *Finding Orion* cover evoke in you? What were your impressions when you first picked it up?
- 15** Discuss the title of this book. What do you think John David Anderson means by *Finding Orion*?

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ACTIVITIES

- 1 When Papa Kwirk planned the gathering to remember his life, he decided that instead of a funeral, he would have a “funneral.” If you were going to plan a funneral (for a real person or pet, for a character from a book or TV show... whoever you want!) what would it be like? Papa Kwirk chose an outdoor amphitheater in his small town, a funny eulogy from his beloved sister, a parade of food trucks, a performance from a high school marching band, and his barbershop quartet singing his favorite song. He chose these things because they represented who he was, what he cared about, and how he wanted people to remember him. Think of what would make a funneral...fun. Get creative. Think about what would best represent the honoree, and how you want the guests to feel and act during the event.
- 2 The Kwirks were sent on a scavenger hunt that reminded them of important highlights in their family’s history. Can you think up a scavenger hunt for your own family? What key memories or places would you want to highlight? What tasks would you want your family to complete?
- 3 Thanks to Mrs. Kwirk’s fascination with space, the Kwirk children are all named after constellations. Research the mythical figures honored by the constellations Orion, Cassiopia and Lyra. Why do you think the Kwirks choose these three constellations in particular? Learn about some other constellations named after mythical figures. Which one would you like to be named after? Consider the actual name, possible nicknames that could come from it, and what the name symbolizes.
- 4 Throughout the novel Lyra informs her family of different funeral and burial customs from cultures around the world. (For example, on page 236 she talks about people in Manila who bury their dead in hollowed out tree trunks, and on page 315 she mentions New Orleans jazz funerals.) Do some research to learn more about one of the traditions she mentions. Or find out about traditions from another culture she didn’t mention. How are these traditions similar to or different from the ones that you may be familiar with?
- 5 Put yourself into Mr. Kwirk’s shoes for a minute. If you had the ability to make candy taste like anything you want, what would you create? Choose your flavors and ingredients, and then up with a marketing campaign to promote them. (For example, how exactly would Mr. Kwirk convince people to try a fried chicken-flavored jelly bean?)
- 6 Given Lyra’s obsession with reading the dictionary, vocabulary words play a big part in this story. She’s constantly looking up words like progeny, verisimilitude and foozler so she can have the perfect word ready when the right situation comes up. Keep a list of words from the book that you didn’t know before Lyra used them. Make sure you know what they mean. Then in true Lyra fashion, grab a dictionary and find five words you have never heard of before. Can you sneak them into conversations?



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