

DISCUSSION GUIDE

**Includes Questions,
Classroom Activities,
and an Exclusive
Author Letter**



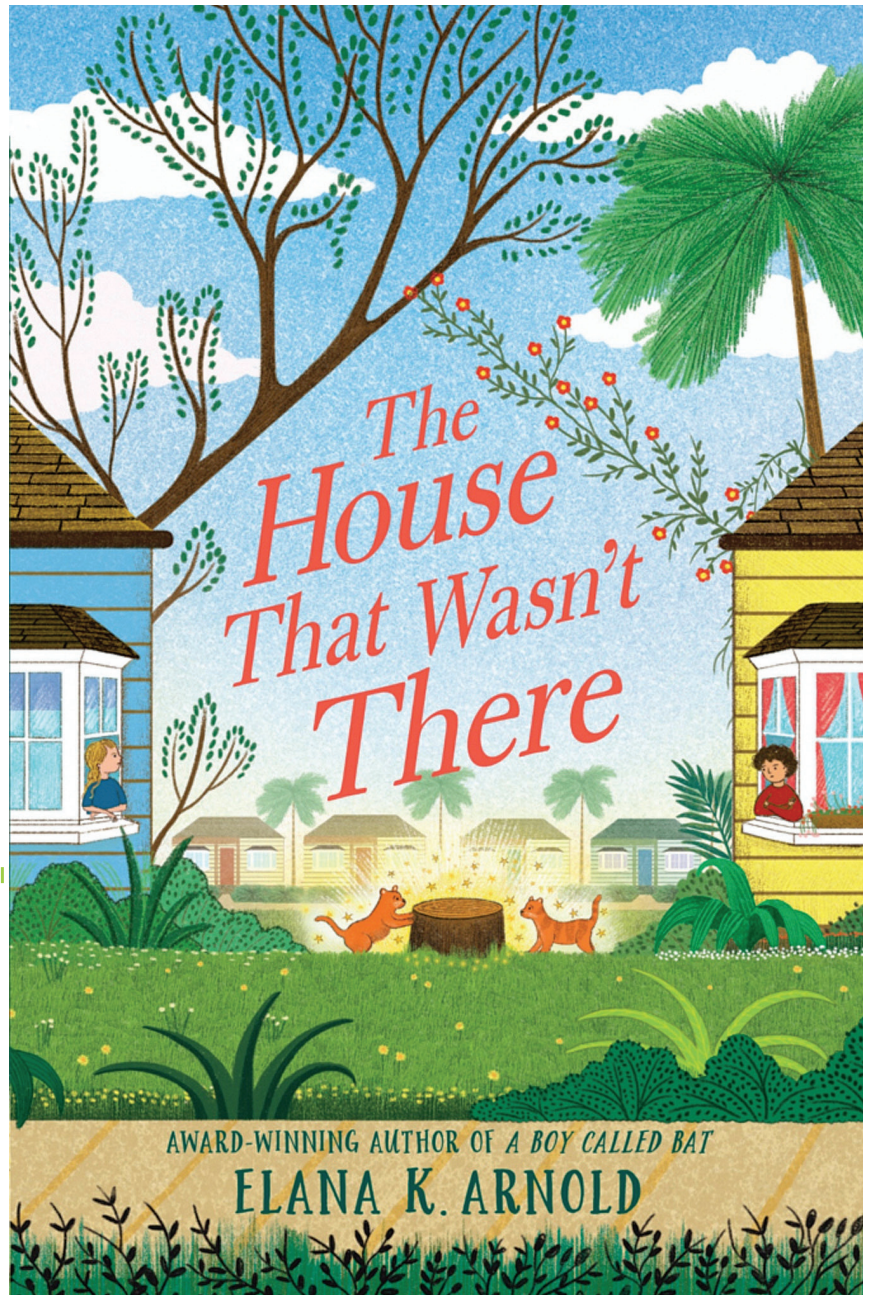
ABOUT THE BOOK

Alder has always lived in his cozy little house in Southern California. And for as long as he can remember, the old, reliable, comforting walnut tree has stood between his house and the one next door. That is, until a new family—with a particularly annoying girl his age—moves into the neighboring house and, without warning, cuts the tree down.

Oak doesn't understand why her family had to move to Southern California. She has to attend a new school, find new friends, and live in a new house that isn't even ready—her mother had to cut down a tree on their property line in order to make room for a second floor. And now a strange boy next door won't stop staring at her, like she did something wrong moving here in the first place.

As Oak and Alder start school together, they can't imagine ever becoming friends. But the two of them soon discover a series of connections between them—mysterious, possibly even magical puzzles they can't put together. At least not without each other's help.

Award-winning author Elana K. Arnold returns with an unforgettable story of the strange, wondrous threads that run between all of us, whether we know they're there or not.





DEAR READER,

I'm so excited you are spending time with Alder, Oak, their kittens, and their friends. Writing this book was so much fun!

All books, no matter how different they are, have some things in common: each story has a plot, a setting, and characters. These are the answers to the questions: "What happens?" "Where does it happen?" and "Who does it happen to?"

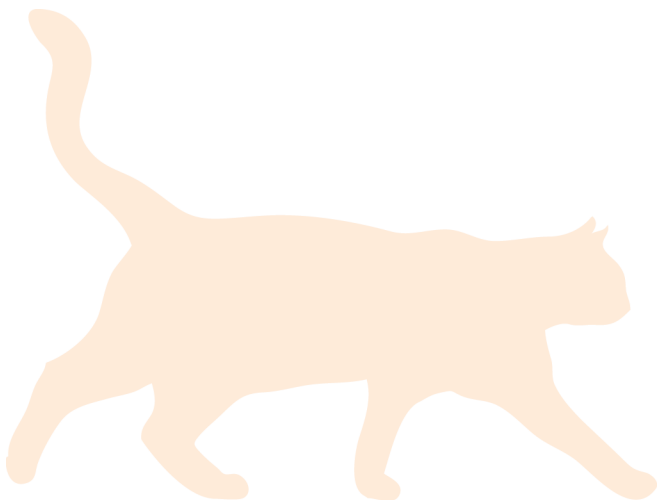
When a writer begins a story, she likely doesn't have the answers to all these questions. I certainly didn't! I didn't know what would happen in my book... and I didn't know who the events would be happening to. But I did have an answer to the question: "Where does it happen?"

The first thing I knew about this story was that it would involve a very special house. A house that wasn't there.

Though this book is about many things, at its heart is one of my core beliefs: We are more connected than we know. Strange, wonderful threads run between all of us, whether we know they're there or not. One of the great pleasures of being a person is reaching out to other people and discovering the things that we share, things that can bring us closer to each other. Books are one way to do this—to imagine being someone else, to see ourselves in the characters. In a way, a book is like a house that isn't there... and opening its pages is like opening a door.

Elana K. Arnold

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PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Consider the message with which the book opens: “Once, not very long ago, there were two houses side by side. In one house lived a boy; in the other lived no one. But that, and everything else, was about to change. Let me tell you what happened.”

- ☐ Who is this message from?
- ☐ What predictions can you make about what will happen or about the themes of the book from this short introduction?
- ☐ What makes someone a friend? How do you make and keep friends? Is it possible to be friends with someone who is different than you? Why are friends important?

CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Chapter 1 Alder

- 🌿 Describe Alder’s relationship with his father. How and why is it different from most kids’ relationships with their parents?
- 🌿 How does Mort end up at Alder’s house?

Chapter 2 Oak

- 🌿 What kind of relationship does Oak have with her parents? How can you tell?
- 🌿 Why does Oak’s family move from the Bay Area to LA? How does Oak feel about the move?
- 🌿 Do you think the woman’s and boy’s reactions are “rude”? What do you think makes them react to Oak that way?
- 🌿 How can you tell the tree will be important to the story? What role do you think it might play?

Chapter 3 Alder

- 🌿 “You didn’t actually have to have a lot in common with someone to be their friend.” (P. 23) Do you agree or disagree with this statement?
- 🌿 What is different about Marcus?

Chapter 4 Oak

- 🌿 How is Oak’s first day of school?
- 🌿 What signs are there that she could grow to accept the move?





CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

Chapter 5 Alder

- Who or what is Mort? Why is Mort important to Alder?
- What surprise does Mom have planned for Alder?
- Why does Alder feel bittersweet about adopting Fern?

Chapter 6 Oak

- What do you think is the reason for the friction between Alder and Oak?
- What do Oak's observations tell us about the kids in their class? How do we learn more about the class from Oak's perspective?

Chapter 7 Alder

- What is the shiny light patch, and how does it make Alder feel?

Chapter 8 Oak

- Why do you think Oak's mother changes her mind about adopting the kitten?
- What do you think catches Walnut's attention through the window?
- What assumptions does Oak make about Alder, and why?
- How does Alder react to Oak pushing him?

Chapter 9 Alder

- How does Marcus feel about Alder? What details make you think this?
- How does Alder feel about Oak?
- What is strange about Oak and Alder's addresses? Why?

Chapter 10 Oak

- Why is Oak outside in the storm?
- Why is Alder outside in the storm?
- Where do Oak and Alder meet up outside, and why?

Chapter 11 Alder

- What is odd about the house in which Oak and Alder find themselves?
- Who and what do they find there?





CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

Chapter 12 Oak

- Why does it not seem like such a coincidence that Oak and Alder have adopted sibling kittens?
- What are some of the questions Oak still has at the end of this chapter?

Chapter 13 Alder

- How do you explain where Oak and Alder went?

- Why does Alder prefer to pretend nothing had happened?
- What details suggest Alder might be envious of Oak?

Chapter 14 Oak

- In what ways do the kittens, Fern and Walnut, remind you of Oak and Alder?
- What does Alder learn about Mort's name? Why is Mort's name fitting?

Chapter 15 Alder

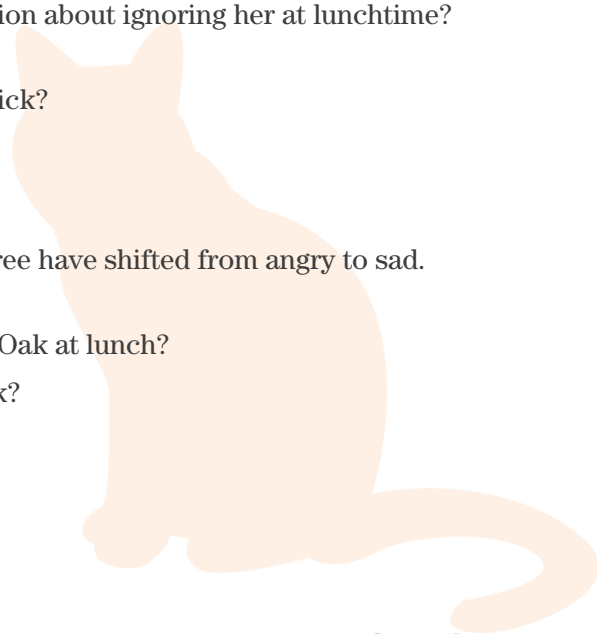
- Why does Alder's mom's reaction change when Alder introduces Oak as their neighbor?
- What are Alder's feelings towards Beck? How can you tell?

Chapter 16 Oak

- Why is Oak dissatisfied with Alder's explanation about ignoring her at lunchtime? Do you support his thinking or not?
- What do you think helps Oak feel less homesick?
- Why is Oak looking for the black book?

Chapter 17 Alder

- Alder realizes his feelings about the walnut tree have shifted from angry to sad. Why do you think his feelings have changed?
- Why is Alder so conflicted about sitting with Oak at lunch?
- How does Alder feel about being without Oak?





CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

Chapter 18 Oak

- How does Oak handle the situation when she finds Alder at the lunch table with her friends? Is it surprising to you that he is there? Why or why not?
- How might you feel to be Alder at lunchtime? To be Oak?
- Why does Oak put so much effort into preparing snacks for Alder's visit?

Chapter 19 Alder

- When Alder returns *Feline Teleportation* to Oak, she says, "All this time...and it was right next door." (P. 172) Is the reappearance of this book magic, coincidence, or serendipity? In what way could this comment refer to more than just the missing book?
- What is strange about the book *Feline Teleportation*?

Chapter 20 Oak

- Why do you think Oak's mother gets "a look" on her face at the mention of the neighbor?
- Why is Oak worried about losing the book?

Chapter 21 Alder

- How do the other kids react to Alder fixing the sweater? Is this the reaction he expected? How do you know?
- What do you think Beck wants to talk about with Alder?
- Why might "Fly, Bird, Fly" be Alder's favorite song his dad wrote?



Chapter 22 Oak

- Explain how Oak and Alder believe they got to Mort's house.
- Oak says she feels scared in a good way. Do you understand what she means? If so, how would you describe this feeling? Have you ever experienced this feeling in your own life?
- What reason might there be for Alder's mom to dislike Oak's mom?

Chapter 23 Alder

- What does it mean to feel intimidated? Why might Beck make Alder feel this way?
- According to the poem Marcus finds, on which day would you choose to cut your nails, and why?
- What does Alder have in common with Beck?



CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

Chapter 24 Oak

- How might you describe Oak's feelings at the start of the chapter?
- Do you see any signs of foreshadowing in this chapter?

Chapter 25 Alder

- What makes Alder think his dad might be at Mort's house?

Chapter 26 Oak

- How does Oak's mother react to finding her home from school? Does her reaction surprise you?

Chapter 27 Alder

- How does Alder feel about finishing Beck's sweater?
- Why does Alder think this was the best lunch he ever had?
- What do the Family Tree DNA results suggest that make Oak stop in her tracks and hurry to Alder's house?

Chapter 28 Oak

- Why are the DNA results unbelievable to Oak and Alder?
- Why wouldn't Oak and Alder's moms have told them they are related?
- How does the plan to get their moms together turn out?

Chapter 29 Alder

- How does Alder know who the man at the door is?
- What is the significance of the way "home" was emphasized in Canary's lyrics when Alder tells the man who is signing?

Chapter 30 Oak

- What happened between Oak's father and Alder's father? What regret does Oak's father carry?
- What does Oak's father offer Alder?

Common Core Standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1,
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2,
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3,
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.4,
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.5,
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6,
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.9,
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.10





FOR MORE DISCUSSION

Structure and Craft Choices:

The House That Wasn't There is written in third person, though the narrator alternates between Alder and Oak's perspectives. How would the novel be different if it were only told from Alder's perspective, or if it were only told from Oak's perspective? In what ways does this choice to alternate between the main characters help readers to experience the emotions and connections of each character more fully?



Alder loves and hates listening to his father's music. "Alder would sit, a puzzle piece in his hand, listening, as if maybe this time the song would have new words, better words. Words that meant something. But it never did." (P. 7) What do we learn about Canary, Alder's father, through the song lyrics included in the story (PPS. 7, 200, 269)? By the end of the book, do you think that Alder gains new insights into some of his father's songs? If so, what kinds of insights?

What's in a Name? The main characters in this novel, Alder and Oak, are named after trees. They are both deliberate in their naming of the kittens. Why are their names for their kittens thoughtful choices? Discuss as a class or in groups: "If you had a new pet, what would you name it? What would be the importance of that name to you?"

Why is *The House That Wasn't There* a fitting title for this novel? What does the title really represent?

Change: Both Oak and Alder are adjusting to changes in this story. What are some of the changes that affect each character? How are they affected by these changes? Think about family structure and relationships with others, especially. Are there any changes the two characters both undergo?

When contemplating the old walnut tree that has been cut down, Alder thinks, "...sometimes building something new meant destroying something old." (P. 63) Later in the story, while talking about the tree, Oak's mother tells her, "Sometimes, a tree has to go. Sometimes, one thing has to end to make room for something else. All of us have to make hard choices, Oak. Someday, you'll understand" (P. 181) What do these quotes mean to you? Can you think of a time when you had to let go of something "old" or let something end to discover or get something new? How does this quote relate to Oak and Alder's story?

Reflect on the way Oak and Alder's relationship changes from the beginning to the end of this novel. Make a list of these changes. To what would you attribute the changes? What one event would you argue had the most significant impact on changing their relationship, and why?



FOR MORE DISCUSSION CONTINUED

Empathy: Early in the novel, when Oak and Alder are still new to each other, they base their choices and actions on assumptions each makes about the other. One example of this is in Chapter 8, when Oak pushes Alder at the bus stop. Why is it dangerous to make assumptions about another person based on what you see on the outside? How do you think this situation would have played out if Oak had known what was happening with Alder under the surface? Have you ever been in a situation where you were quick to judge someone based on what you could see on the outside?

Are Oak and Alder more alike or more different as characters? Compare the two with examples from the book. Then debate your idea with another reader or small group.

Grief and Loss: Both Oak and Alder miss their fathers through most of the book. Alder's father passed away suddenly; Oak's father is living away from home while he finishes a work commitment. How are Alder's and Oak's feelings of loss and absence similar? What comforts Oak's homesickness? What comforts Alder's grief?

When Alder is at Mort's house, he wonders if his father ever visited there. "There is more than one way to travel," Mort said. "Energy, you know, cannot be created or destroyed. It can be harnessed and it can be let free. But it's still there, dear children. Energy never dies." (P. 243) What do you think Mort is trying to explain? In what ways does Mort's explanation about the principles of energy relate to the death or loss of a person?

Houses and Homes: What makes a house more than a physical building? How does a physical space take on a sense of "home"? How do you explain "home" as a feeling?

Mort's Riddle: What do you think is the answer to Mort's riddle? (P. 279)

Mort's riddle describes how love is shared between people, including in looks, songs, cooking, and touch. Think back on how the relationship between Alder and Oak develops, and about their relationships with other characters throughout the novel.

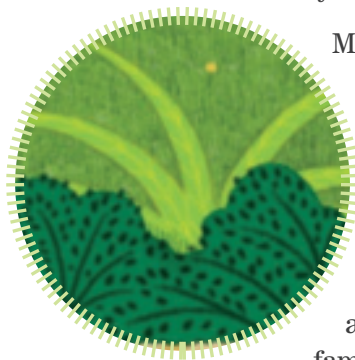
- ☐ Can you recall any examples of looks or touch that communicate love in this story?
- ☐ When is love shown in preparing and sharing food?
- ☐ What love is communicated through music?





ENRICHMENT AND EXTENSIONS

Humanities: Knitting makes Alder feel calm and comfortable. He is also a very accomplished knitter. If you are curious about what it's like to knit, see if you can find or borrow some needles and yarn. You can learn how to knit from a craft book from the library or via an online video.



Marcus and Alder discover a surprising world record about the longest toenails during Mr. Rivera's class project. Explore world records on your own. What other surprising or outlandish records are there? Are there any world records you would like to break or challenge?

When Oak is unhappy with the decisions the grown-ups make, her mother likes to remind her that their family is not a "democracy." A democracy is a form of government in which everyone has a vote, or has a say, in decisions. Learn more about how democratic government works. Think about decisions in your own family or classroom. What kinds of things do you decide in a democratic style? What decisions are not made this way? Why can't every decision be made democratically?

Science and Engineering: Learn more about the real-life scientists and inventors mentioned in *Feline Teleportation*.

- ☐ Investigate the true story of Nikola Tesla and his introduction to electricity through his cat, Macak. How are Tesla's inventions the result of this early curiosity?
- ☐ Who was Henrietta Swan Leavitt, and what was her contribution to the field of astronomy?
- ☐ Who is Erwin Schrödinger, and what was he trying to prove with his Schrödinger's cat theory?
- ☐ What is the story behind the invention of the first nail clipper by Eugene Heim and Oelestin Matz?

Static electricity is central to the kittens' travel in this book. What makes static electricity? What kinds of materials are good conductors of electricity and which are insulators? Design your own experiment to generate and transmit static electricity.

Learn more about DNA and ancestry. How do companies use DNA to tell us about our family lineage and connections to one another? Why do you think people are so interested in discovering their ancestry?



ENRICHMENT AND EXTENSIONS CONTINUED

Research the concept of teleportation.

- ☐ How would teleportation be helpful to humankind? In what ways could it be problematic?
- ☐ If you could teleport, to where would you want to travel, and why?
- ☐ What other books or movies are you familiar with in which characters are teleported between worlds? How do they compare with *The House That Wasn't There*?



Construct a model of Oak and Alder's houses, with the new addition that connects them. Try your hand at designing tunnels for Fern and Walnut.

Creative Writing: Alder's father, Canary Madigan, was a musician and songwriter. Revisit some of the song lyrics from his music in this book. Notice how he used the poetry of lyrics to communicate his emotions. Then, try writing a song of your own to express your love for someone or someplace special to you.

Write your own story of cat teleportation. Design a cat character of your choosing. Select a place to which they will travel. Take inspiration from Fern and Walnut. Where will they go? What will they do there? Does their human ever know or realize their magical powers?



DISCUSSION GUIDE
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