

Reading Guide



The Boys

Katie Hafner

*Spiegel
and Grau*



Reading Group Guide



1. Katie Hafner said in an interview that one of her goals in writing *The Boys* was to create a novel in which all the characters are, at their core, good people. Why might an author set a goal like this one—and what do you think of such a goal for a novel? Do you believe she succeeded? Can you think of other novels in which all the characters, despite their flaws or missteps, are people who consistently try to do the right thing?
2. Ethan describes himself as socially awkward and taciturn, with his quiet introversion a stark contrast to Barb's outgoing nature. Their pairing in *The Boys* might be seen as a case of "opposites attract." Does this adage ring true to you? Was their relationship convincing to you, or could you see the end in sight? Are you more drawn to people with whom you share qualities or those who are radically different?

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3. One of Ethan's professional talents lies in reverse engineering. As he describes it, "It's like being given a slice of cake, then being told to unbake it and produce the recipe and list the raw ingredients." How might the narrative structure of *The Boys* serve as an example of reverse engineering? How would you understand this story differently if it had been told in a conventional, chronological way—beginning with Ethan meeting Barb? What can doing things in reverse reveal that a linear approach might not?
4. When you first recognized the surprising twist of the novel, what was your reaction? Did you see it coming, or was it completely unexpected? Did it deepen the themes of the novel for you, and if so, in what ways? Did you feel Hafner's narrative decision was a feat of storytelling or did you feel annoyed that she withheld crucial information? Can you think of other books or films that contain a twist or surprise that made you reevaluate the entire work?
5. From automated phone calls to the social isolation of the pandemic and even to Ethan's self-imposed solitude, emotional distance and disconnect permeate *The Boys*. In her research, Barb makes the "clear distinction between social isolation and loneliness," claiming that "it's possible to be socially isolated without feeling lonely." Discuss the themes of loneliness and solitude in the book.
6. Given the isolation so many felt during Covid, do you consider this novel a pandemic novel or one simply set during a pandemic? To what extent do you think the pandemic is a trigger for the breakdown of Ethan and Barb's relationship? Would their

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conflict have occurred regardless of the pandemic? How might things have played out differently in other circumstances? One result of the pandemic is the intensification of Ethan's peculiarities and personality tics, for example, his reclusiveness and his fears of the outside world. Which of your behaviors were magnified during the pandemic? How might your habits have changed for better or for worse?

7. Midway through the Italy bike trip, Gus, Izzy's boyfriend, asks her, "What do you think makes Ethan tick?" Izzy struggles to give a complete answer but says she is taken by "something so pure about him and his love for the boys." Do you agree with her assessment? How would you answer Gus's question? When in the novel did you feel you understood Ethan the best? And conversely, at which points did his thoughts or actions seem incomprehensible?
8. Ethan finds an unlikely kinship with Signora Fiore, the elderly Italian woman distributing cloth people around her deserted village to replace those who have left or passed away. Like Ethan, Signora Fiore "imbue[s] non-people with people-like traits," projecting her own world onto what is no longer there. What are the similarities and differences between the cloth people and Tommy and Sam? Signora Fiore's ritual of placing the cloth people around the village appears to be a way for her to grieve and memorialize her community. Where would you draw the line between an unreality that is cathartic and one that is delusional?
9. When we return to Ethan's perspective, we learn that he is somewhat aware that the boys began as a shared fiction between him and Barb. He says: "Barb had made it all seem so harmless. And

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it was. Or should have been. Before long, I was all in. I was the one who conferred personalities on the boys, and most of all, a keen need for protection.” Yet Ethan also says that he cannot fully remember the moment when he met them, recalling only the “haziest outlines.” How aware do you think Ethan is that the boys are not real?

10. Through Barb, we learn that Tommy and Sam originate from a photograph taken by Dorothy Lange during the Great Depression and that their reality is far removed from the backstories given to them. Why is this revelation significant? What do you know about this period in history, and do you want to know more about the real lives of these boys? How would you feel if your own image was repurposed in this way?
11. The novel closes with Ethan reconciling with Barb, returning to Miss Flo’s, the jukebox, and the early rituals of their relationship, though there is still a lot of work to do to heal the breach between them. Do you feel optimistic about their future together? What has changed and what needs to happen next to repair their marriage?