

Simon Sort of Says

ERIN BOW

This book deals with the aftermath of school violence, including post-traumatic stress disorder. The author and guide writer worked with a psychologist to accurately portray and discuss possible reactions to this type of violence. You can find more information about post-traumatic stress disorder at the end of this guide.

ABOUT THE BOOK

For fans of Kate DiCamillo and Jack Gantos, a hilarious, wrenching, hopeful novel about finding your friends, healing your heart, and speaking your truth.

Simon O’Keeffe’s biggest claim to fame should be the time his dad accidentally gave a squirrel a holy sacrament. Or maybe the alpaca disaster that went viral on YouTube. But the story the whole world wants to tell about Simon is the one he’d do anything to forget: the story in which he’s the only kid in his class who survived a school shooting. Two years after the infamous event, twelve-year-old Simon and his family move to the National Quiet Zone—the only place in America where the internet is banned. Instead of talking about Simon, the astronomers who flock to the area are busy listening for signs of life in space. And when Simon makes a friend who’s determined to give the scientists what they’re looking for, he’ll finally have the chance to spin a new story for the world to tell.

From award-winning author Erin Bow, *Simon Sort of Says* is a breathtaking testament to the lasting echoes of trauma, the redemptive power of humor, and the courage it takes to move forward without forgetting the past.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erin Bow was born and raised in Iowa and trained as a physicist, so naturally she now spends her days writing children’s fiction in a tiny (heated) garden shed in Ontario, Canada. Her books—which include the Governor General’s Award-winning *Stand on the Sky*, *Plain Kate*, *Sorrow’s Knot*, and the science-fiction duology *The Scorpion Rules* and *The Swan Riders*—have won a fistful of awards. Erin lives with her husband (who’s also a novelist), two teenage kids, a tabby named after a rock, a black cat named after a black hole, and an empty-headed, big-hearted dog named after the moon. Visit her online at ErinBow.com and [@ErinBowBooks](https://www.instagram.com/ErinBowBooks).



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

CHAPTER 1 *In Which We Are Driven Out of Omaha by Alpacas*

1. Describe the National Quiet Zone (NQZ) in three words. Why do you think some people would be attracted to such a place? Would you want to live there? How does Simon feel about the NQZ, and what makes you think that?
2. “[The alpaca] stood there blinking its big Bambi eyes, looking cute and seeing blood and knives. . . . Then the other alpaca started in, and it sounded like angry Scots with chest colds were coming to kill us all.” (page 3) How did you react when you first read this description? Does the author’s use of imagery help you to picture the scene? How does the usage of violent imagery in the book help to shape your understanding of Simon’s world?
3. “When I first heard about [the radio telescopes], I thought that meant: no radio. And it does. But it also means no television, no cell phones, no microwave ovens, and no internet. When I heard *that*, I thought: *Perfect*.” (page 7) Why is the NQZ perfect for Simon to live in?
4. How does the first-person narration by Simon help you to empathize with him as the reader? What if the book were written in third-person? Do you feel it would be as engaging?

CHAPTER 2 *In Which My New Seventh-Grade Class Learns That a Sackbut Is a Kind of Trombone*

5. “The hardest thing about moving to Grin And Bear It, Nebraska, is starting a new school. In February. Ask anybody: That’s the stuff of seventh-grade *nightmares*.” (page 8) This is a sentence that can make a grown adult shiver. Can you relate with Simon’s worries about moving to a new school six months into the school year? If you can relate, can you think of why this would be intimidating?
6. Simon’s dad likes to say, “There’s no blending into an empty field” (page 9). What does this mean? Do you think people should blend into the field or is there merit to not blending?
7. “I don’t like my stiff and clearly brand-new backpack, but I never got the old one back, so I power through that like a champ.” (page 9) Throughout the beginning chapters, we get a glimpse of what Simon might have endured. How would you feel if you never received your previous year’s backpack or belongings? What does it tell you about Simon that he can “power through” this?
8. “I make it up the steps without tripping or dropping anything or falling prey to any of the other disaster scenarios my brain is working overtime on. (My brain, if you haven’t got this yet, specializes in disaster scenarios.)” (page 10) Simon has a great sense of humor and can make light of challenging situations. How do you think his upbeat personality and sense of humor might help him during this time? If you were starting at a new school, what types of “what if” scenarios might you imagine? Do you think this type of thinking helps people in new situations and environments?
9. “On her face she has that look owls always have, like she’s bored but barely suppressing suspicion and rage. . . . She smiles, owlshly. Like she would totally eat Mr. Tuna.” (page 11) Simon uses *zoomorphism* (giving animal attributes to a person or non-animal) to describe his new principal, Ms. Snodgrass. How does this make you feel about Ms. Snodgrass? How do you think Simon feels toward school staff?
10. “It’s like the circus has come to town. I stand like the acrobat on the high wire—drumroll and all—trying hard to smile and even harder to make it look casual. . . . I want absolutely nothing more than to be overlooked.” (pages 12–13) Simon describes standing in front of his new classmates as if it were an acrobatic circus performance. How does this simile (comparison using the words “like” or “as”) help us to visualize the moment? Have you ever felt like you were in the spotlight? How did you feel or notice about your body? What was your reaction? What advice would you give to Simon at this moment?

11. “The bell is loud . . . and my body slams backward into the chalkboard, the eraser tray jamming into my hip. But none of the other kids notice. For them it’s just the bell.” (page 14) When Simon hears the bell, his body reacts immediately to the sound as it triggers a sensory memory of a traumatic event. Simon notices that he is the only person reacting as it does not affect the other kids in the same way. How do you think Simon felt when he realized how he had automatically responded to the bell but no one else had?
12. “I don’t make any friends, really . . . but on the bright side I don’t attract much attention. And there isn’t any internet. No one looks me up.” (page 15) Simon manages to fly under the radar on his first day. Why do you think this is a “win” for him? Why is the internet, or lack thereof, so important to him?

CHAPTER 3 *In Which I Meet a Girl (Not in a Kissing-Book Way)*

13. “All in all, it’s not a popular lunch spot. But the end of the hall is out of the way, and the exit gives me an escape route, so it suits me just fine.” (page 17) Simon chooses a lunch spot that is in front of the emergency exit but away from everyone else. What sort of things do you think Simon worries about that most other people don’t? How do you think this affects his daily routines and quality of life? What do you think of Simon’s ability to imagine the worst-case scenario—is it a strength, weakness, or something in between?
14. “My parents would probably be delighted if I asked to go riding around our new town after school. I mean, they’d sit at the kitchen table clutching each other’s hands and holding their breath with suppressed panic until I got back, but they’d *say* they were delighted.” (pages 18–19) Why do you think Simon’s parents are anxious about his return to school? What does it say about Simon that he’s so aware of how his parents would respond to him having a friend? How do you think they are trying to balance Simon’s safety with his freedom?
15. Grin and Bear It has two distinct sides: Team Science and Team Farm. There is a little overlap, but mostly, these two sides stay to themselves. Do you think it’s true that society separates into different camps? Does your school or community feel blended or separated, and how do you feel about it?
16. “Kids get sorted into Team Farm or Team Science the way they get sorted into boys and girls. Like—anyone can do anything, but that doesn’t stop people from giving you whatever label they think you ought to have, whether you wanted it or not.” (page 22) What do you think Simon thinks about black-and-white thinking? Why do you think we label and categorize people? Think of the ways that this can be helpful or hurtful to the person who is being labeled and also to the person who is doing the labeling.
17. “I don’t know if I should pick a side, or if I’m going to get assigned a side, or what. On the plus side, having a team makes you less of a target, which is a real thing in junior high. On the other hand, sometimes it’s smarter to sit with your back to the wall and your eyes on the exit.” (page 22) Simon is on the fence about which side he is going to be part of. This is one example of his indecisiveness. Can you spot any other areas where you see this? Why do you think Simon has trouble making decisions? Does it have anything to do with his tendency to imagine “what if” scenarios?

CHAPTER 4 *In Which Our Peacock Meets a Girl (in a Kissing-Book Way)*

18. Agate visits Simon at his house for the first time and she is “sexually harassed” by Pretty Stabby. Her response is “I understand. I live with goats” (page 26). What does this say about her personality and temperament? How is she similar or different from Simon?
19. “My dad beams at Agate. You can totally tell that it’s been a while since I had friends over and he’s delighted. He needs to chill a little. ‘Can I get you kids juice boxes or something?’” (page 27) Simon sees that his parents have been concerned about his return to school and socializing and that they are truly

thrilled to see him making friends. What do you think is going through their minds as they watch their son interact with his peers again?

20. “Agate bursts, just *bursts*, with laughter. If she was all phrase book before, it’s like laughter is her native language. She turns pink with it, and I’m smiling before I know why.” (page 29) What kind of effect does Agate have on Simon? Do you think it’s important to be able to laugh with your friends over silly things? Do you think Simon has been able to do this in the past couple years?
21. Agate explains to Simon that she’s autistic. Simon responds by saying, “That’s cool.” He also thinks, “Agate being cool about her brain stuff makes me feel safer about my brain stuff. Not safe enough to get into it or anything—but safer” (page 30). Why do you think Simon feels safer with Agate? Have you ever felt something similar, where you felt safer with a friend because they shared something about themselves?
22. Simon has major hesitations about Agate’s plan to bring a SETI message to their quiet town. So why does he agree to hear more about it?

CHAPTER 5 *In Which I Meet a Boy (Not in a Kissing-Book Way) and Reconsider That Message from Space*

23. When Simon learns that Kevin’s family has computers in their home, he has a visceral response. Describe what happens to Simon on page 36 and how he tries to cope with his response. What are his thoughts as he practices box breathing? What sorts of thoughts does Simon have to juggle as he calms himself? Do you think this is easy or difficult for a young person to do?
24. “One of the nice things about Kev is that he never thinks I might be hiding anything.” (page 37) Why do you think Simon feels comfortable around both Kevin and Agate?
25. In design and tech class, Simon’s bridge doesn’t crack; it shatters. Kevin says, “They crack along their weak points. If they explode it means they don’t have any weak points” (page 39). Dr. Matapang states, “Technically it means they can store a lot of internal stress. . . . But that’s roughly equivalent. Excellent job, Simon” (page 39). Simon is praised for building a structure that can store a large amount of internal stress. Oftentimes in society, we are praised for how much we can take on both externally (physically) or internally (emotionally/mentally). What are the effects when we overload ourselves in this way? What do you think is happening to Simon internally as he navigates his return to school and a “normal life”?
26. Kevin tells Simon about the looming problem the postdocs in town might face. How is their problem a grave concern for Simon? How does he react to Kevin’s news? (page 49)

CHAPTER 6 *In Which I See the Large Radio Telescope . . .*

27. Why does Simon change his mind about Agate’s plan for keeping the SETI scientists occupied? What is his Simon Says mode, and is he in this mode often? (page 50)
28. Describe Agate’s family and home. List two surprising things you learned about them. What information does Simon let slip out? (pages 55–61)

A NOTE ON TIME

29. What is Agate’s plan for sending the space message? (pages 62–63)

CHAPTER 7 *In Which Agate Gives Me a Surprise*

30. “Because after it all happened, the phone would not stop ringing. . . . And when we stopped answering it, people just showed up at our door. They showed up at our *windows*.” (page 66) How does it make you feel to learn that Simon and his family had no privacy after their ordeal? Can you imagine what daily life might have been like for the O’Keeffe family?
31. “I remember that I didn’t actually say no. I try to get a no out now. I mean, a dog, a puppy, yes, maybe. But giving it up, losing it—there’s just no way.” (page 67) How does Simon end up getting a service dog from Agate? Why is he hesitant in the first place?
32. “But it’s like how Agate knows the runt is my favorite. She gets it and I don’t have to tell her.” (page 69) Describe the dynamic between Simon and Agate. Why is Agate the friend that Simon needs in the now and possibly forever future?

CHAPTER 9 *Attack of the Jesus Squirrel*

33. Explain the Jesus Squirrel saga. (page 76–78)

CHAPTER 10 *In Which There Are Snacks and Space Aliens*

34. Describe what the fear imprint stage is and why it’s important. (page 85)
35. “My job is just to be Herc’s mom and stick close and keep him happy and show him as many of the safe things as I can. If he gets scared at all, my job is not to push it, just to whisk him away.” (page 85) Do you agree with Simon? Do you see the parents in the story doing this? If you could add to Simon’s description of what a parent’s job is, what would you say?
36. “Kevin zips through the start-up menu and launches in, and neither one of them notices that I haven’t actually said yes to this.” (page 91) What pattern are you noticing about Simon’s ability or inability to speak up for himself? How do you think this has shaped his relationships and life decisions?
37. “My hands are going numb, which means bad stuff is sneaking up on me. I am not a huge fan of traumatic backstories. . . . I name five things I can see, and four things I can touch, and by the time I get down to one thing I can taste it’s popcorn, and I’m okay to go back upstairs.” (page 92–93) Simon is self-aware and can sense when his anxiety and fear levels rise. Does this grounding technique seem helpful to Simon, and would you consider using them when you are feeling anxious? As an exercise, look around the room and note five things you can see, four things you can hear, and three things you can touch. Discuss with your partner or group how you felt after the exercise.
38. What parts of the movie *Contact* did Simon find the most triggering? Why does he say that Agate’s plan might turn into his “personal nightmare”?

CHAPTER 11 *In Which We Need to Talk About Microwaves (But Don’t)*

39. “Maybe I’m like an old-school computer and I only have one slot labeled *bad attention* in my brain, which was already filled. . . . My brain specializes in disaster spiraling, and oh boy is it circling the drain.” (page 98) Simon is prone to thinking of disaster scenarios and focusing on negative outcomes—or catastrophic thinking. If you were Simon’s friend, how would you support him in these instances? If you have ever found yourself imagining the worst, what has helped you to think more clearly and calmly?
40. “I don’t want these [friends] to get hurt. So, I pull the Simon Says special. I don’t decide—I hide” (page 99). Since Simon is anxious about Agate’s plan, he decides to avoid the topic altogether.

This seems to work in the short term, but how do you think things will end up in the long term if Simon “hides” from making decisions?

41. “In a single week I go from being the new kid who lives with dead people to the new kid who brings a puppy to school. People still don’t know what team to put me on, but they like puppies, so: major upgrade.” (page 100) What are the pros and cons of avoiding stressful situations? What could end up happening if we continuously distract ourselves from difficult situations?
42. “What’s weird is that I got so busy with thinking about Agate’s space message plan and socializing Herc that I forget to count down to the anniversary and brace myself and all that stuff. But it’s like my body remembers even though my head forgets.” (page 101) Simon feels that even if he forgets about something his body will remember it. Have you ever felt that way? How do you think Simon could prepare for something this stressful?
43. Describe “positive socialization experiences” and why it’s important for service dogs and humans alike. (page 102) How does Simon react to Herc, and why does Agate notice it? What could be happening to Simon internally?
44. Agate says, “I think— It’s like when you see a photo, it doesn’t look different because someone took it a while back and a long way away. You see it and it’s the same. A photo is now” (page 109). Simon has a visceral reaction to this statement. Can you explain why “there are times when the worst thing a friend can be is right” (page 110)?
45. Simon ends the chapter by telling Agate: “I just want to be the [Simon] from now” (page 110). What are some things we can do to live fully in the present? How do you think Simon can do this, especially when he says, “I think there’s never going to be a now. I think there’s always going to be a before, and an after” (page 111)?

CHAPTER 12 *In Which Teenagers Are Given Craft Supplies and Left Unsupervised*

46. The students are called into the gym, where they are sitting tightly together and Simon is sandwiched between Agate and Kevin. Even though he notices that it’s “too much like a pile on” and that he can “feel my stiff body getting stiffer,” he tells his friends that he’s fine (page 114). Why might Simon tell his friends that he is fine when he is experiencing such strong reactions?
47. How does Hercules respond to Simon tensing up on page 115? How does Simon feel, and what is he able to say when Agate begins talking about the SETI plan?

CHAPTER 13 5/15

48. How does the anniversary day begin for Simon and his family? What kind of anniversary are they remembering? (page 117)
49. Simon’s parents don’t ask him to go to school. His mom makes him French toast for breakfast. They take turns lying over the bed with Simon without saying anything about the messiness of his room. His dad brings him cookies with grilled cheese and jam (page 118). “[Mom] stops short and makes a little gulpy noise that sometimes she makes instead of crying. My dad joggles her arm back and forth. We all breathe together” (pages 118–19). How does it make you feel that Simon’s parents are trying to be with him in his grief? How do you think Simon feels about having such supportive parents? How do you think he feels when he sees his mom trying not to cry?
50. “Two years ago, I was locked in a third-floor classroom with only one door, and I couldn’t get out. But now I’m walking. We’re walking. We emerge into our backyard, blinking in the sunlight like cave people. . . . The real world, the now. We walk out into it together” (p 120–21). What did Simon experience two years ago at his former school? How is this beautiful description of Simon and his parents going for a walk much more than that?

A NOTE ON LOCKDOWNS

51. “I said we couldn’t get out, back then. The worst truth is: We didn’t try. We did what they told us to do. . . . We sheltered in place” (page 122). What sorts of lingering feelings do you think Simon harbors from his past? How do you feel about practicing lockdowns at school? Can you remember the first time you practiced a lockdown?

CHAPTER 14 *In Which Kevin Googles Alpacas*

52. “It’s the Sunday after the Friday that is 5/15, and we have survived. We are on our feet. It feels like a turning point.” (page 123) Why do you think Kevin is optimistic on Sunday morning? Why is it significant that Simon and his family are on their feet? What do you think the previous anniversaries were like for them?
53. “The kitchen is crowded in a happy way. Spring is sliding toward summer—next week is the last week of school. I’ve almost done it: I’ve almost survived my first year back.” (page 124) Have you ever celebrated “surviving” a school year? How do you think Simon feels about “surviving” his first year back in school? If you were his parents, what kind of encouraging words would you share with him?
54. When Simon asks to go over Kevin’s house, his parents “glance at each other, like: *Hey, look. We’re doing a normal thing.* The last week of school, and the Sunday after that is Pentecost—we’re almost to Ordinary Time” (page 125). How do you think Simon’s parents feel about all of them finishing his first year back? What is Ordinary Time, and why does Simon’s dad cherish it? Why does Simon now appreciate it?
55. “I know it’s hard for Kev, caught between his mom who wants him to kick that rock so he’ll ‘have choices’ and his dad, who is happy being an unrounded stone.” (page 126) Does Kevin feel the freedom to be who he wants to be in front of his parents? If parents want their children to “have choices in life,” should they allow them the freedom to make their own choices?
56. What does Kevin tell Simon that stuns him?
57. “Other kids went back. Other kids were hashtag Omaha Onward. But I didn’t have a class to go back to. My friends—they’re all dead, and when I think about it it’s like having stones piled on me.” (page 129) How does Kevin feel about how quickly Simon’s old school reopened? How do you feel? Crushing was an ancient way to execute someone by piling stones on top of them. Why does Simon use this simile when remembering his old classmates?
58. Simon was from a small town near Omaha and went to Eagle Crest Elementary. He recounts the school shooting in a factual but chilling way. The shooter was not from the school nor did he know anyone there. He chose to go up one flight of stairs, arbitrarily. Simon says, “Sometimes things just happen” (page 131). When school or mass shootings occur, people try to make sense of what happened by exploring it from all angles from the shooter’s motives to the layout of the building. Simon has worked with a therapist to come to the conclusion that sometimes there is no reason for horrific events. What do you think about this conclusion?

A NOTE ABOUT EXPLOSIVES

59. “This is a thing we fight about, too: whether what happened is something that happened to me and then crashed into my family, or whether we all crashed together. (Hint: The right answer is the first one.)” (page 133) When Simon and his family realize that the news is spreading about their past, his dad says, “This is us. We’re in this together.” Do you agree that Simon’s entire family is in this situation

together? How do you think Simon's parents can support him through this time? When something traumatic or difficult happens, does it happen to one person in the family or to the entire family?

CHAPTER 15 *In Which There Are Emus*

60. Simon worries about how to break the news to Agate and wakes up at four a.m., soaked in sweat and feeling wrung out and empty. He looks outside the window. "It's the gray time before dawn, when the world looks like a video game that hasn't finished rendering, like if you went outside they wouldn't have the end of the street created yet. It doesn't seem quite real, but it's peaceful." (page 135) How is this a fitting simile for the new day? How can it also be a simile for the new life that Simon wants to create in GNB?
61. On page 139, Simon asks his mom if she's sorry they moved to GNB. Her answer is: "Not a bit . . . It wasn't just for you, Simon, you know. I knew those kids, too. I knew their moms and dads, and then I . . . You're not the only one who wanted to get the h-e-l-l out of Eagle Crest." One of the many things that Simon has carried with him since the school shooting is guilt. He feels guilty for being the lone survivor, but he also feels guilty for having uprooted his family. He feels guilty for the personal setbacks that his parents are experiencing. What does this honest conversation with his mom reveal, and how can it help him to move forward and heal alongside his parents?
62. Describe the scene when Simon tells Agate about his past. How did Simon muster up the courage to tell her the truth? How does Agate respond to his bombshell? Why does Agate say to Simon, "You should discuss that with your trauma specialist" (pages 147–48)?
63. The googled photo of Simon is of him when the police entered the classroom, shouting for everyone to raise their hands. "[I'm] the kid from the bottom of the pile, all smeared, with his hands up and his face shattered. He's a third-person kid. He's light-years away. But sometimes I'm still frozen inside him. He's a still image so his lungs don't work so good, and I have to tell him how to breathe." (page 148) Simon feels like he is frozen inside the most publicized photo of himself, and that the trauma he experienced is locked within the boy who is in the photo. He is removed from what happened to him at Eagle Crest by time and space—but the trauma he experienced resurfaces again and again, reminding him of his past. Dr. Gabor Maté says: "*Trauma is not what happens to you, it's what happens inside you as a result of what happened to you.*" (italics added for emphasis, humanwindow.com/dr-gabor-mate-interview...) How do you think Simon's experience may have impacted his view of the world and his own safety? What about the impact of the triggers that he experiences?
64. Why does Simon want to tell Agate about his past? What does he tell Agate that makes her smile like the "sun coming up" (page 148)?

CHAPTER 16 *In Which My Plan Is Not to Have a Plan*

65. Simon doesn't want to talk about the space message plan with Agate because he feels his anonymity is in jeopardy and he wants to fly under the radar. Agate says their message is separate from what happened at Eagle Crest. "For me, it never has been. All the reasons I wanted to try it, all the reasons I was afraid to try it, they were all tangled up in keeping Eagle Crest secret. Now the secret is getting out but they still seem tangled. Like a giant ball of string that's rolling fast." (page 154) Explain why Simon feels like his life in GNB is falling apart and why he wants to take a step back from Agate's plan.
66. "I'm not like a damn. I'm like a glass. If I break I'm going to be broken forever. I don't want to say hi to him." (page 159) Why does Simon feel like he will shatter like glass if he starts talking to Doc Matapang?

CHAPTER 17 *In Which We Don't Die in the Mojave Desert but Almost Die in the School Basement*

67. “Two weeks ago, one of the other girls called Agate a hippo. Agate told her that . . . hippos, not tigers or anything, are the large animal that kills the most humans. Then she smiled so big her molars showed and went back to running across Utah.” (page 163) What are three words you would use to describe Agate? How do you think her qualities and personality complement Simon’s?
68. “I slam into the sidewalk before I even know what the sound is—I’m just *down*. The sirens are loud like the end of the world. Someone grabs my arm. I crab away, my chin scraping on concrete. I clamp my teeth together so I won’t make any noise—no sounds to give me away.” (page 165) What is happening at the school, and why does Simon respond in this way?
69. “A warm hand closes around my wrist. Not like someone grabbing me—like someone ready to rescue me, to pull me out of a hole. A wet nose pushes against the pit of my elbow where it’s folded against my ear and I can hear the whimper.” (page 166) Who has come to rescue Simon? How does it feel different from the other people who tried to drag him away?
70. “You are having a panic attack. . . . Can you breathe? Keep breathing. I asked my sensory processing specialist to tell me about panic attacks so I could help you and I learned that telling you to breathe is the best thing. Please keep breathing. I would like that very much.” (page 166) Some of the symptoms of a panic attack include rapid heart rate, shortness of breath, dizziness, numbness, and a feeling of detachment. Why is it important that Agate identifies Simon’s panic attack and that she stays close to Simon? Agate talked to her own specialist about how to best help Simon. What does that tell you about how she feels about Simon?
71. “Agate keeps holding on to me through the whole thing. She knows I’m stuck in a well, and she’s ready to pull me up. . . . Her grip hasn’t shifted. For all I know she’s never going to let go and that’s *fine*. I feel like without her I might just float right out of the world.” (page 169) When Brent Fritsch singles Simon out for crying and everyone turns to stare at him, Agate defends her friend. When Brent teases Simon and says “Sack Butt’s got a girlfriend,” Agate defends her friend again. Agate is autistic, intuitive, empathetic, intelligent, and protective. Of all the characters in the book, she is the one who understands and supports Simon the most—even though she herself gets singled out and teased. What kind of message does the author want us to understand about Agate’s friendship with Simon?

CHAPTER 18 *Revenge of the Jesus Squirrel*

72. “When my mom grabs me hard, she’s like an eagle who’s going to carry me off. When my dad grabs me hard, he’s like a bear who’s never going to let me move again.” (page 176) Simon compares his mom to an eagle and his dad to a bear. How is it strangely comforting to imagine his parents as these strong and protective animals?
73. At the end of the chapter, Simon thinks: “It’s not okay. It won’t be okay. Moving to Grin And Bear It was my chance to outrun Eagle Crest, but now—the Team Science rumors, and everybody seeing my big trauma thing today, and now Dad melting down . . . there’s no way it will ever be okay again.” (page 178) Simon feels disheartened and hopeless about his new life in GNB; he feels like he and his family have lost their chance at living a “normal” life. Have you or someone you cared about ever felt these very strong emotions? Did you find anything to be helpful? What do you think could be helpful for Simon during this time? (examples: talking to a trusted friend or adult, making a plan of action, meditating on something positive)

CHAPTER 19 *In Which There Might Be Damage We Can't See From Here*

74. “I feel like something in a display case—like a bug with a pin stuck through me. Like the frozen kid in the photograph: the one who comes up if you google my name. It’s the first day of school for that kid. The one who everyone knows.” (page 180) Why does Simon say that it’s the “first day” for him as Simon O’Keeffe? How is this day at school different from when he first walked into GNB Upper?
75. Describe the shrine that Simon sees on page 181 and how he reacts to it. Why do you think the students created it? Do you think they expected this kind of response from Simon? When Agate asks Simon what’s wrong and if he has been triggered, he replies: “Of course it’s about my trauma and anxiety! All I wanted was to fly under the radar! Do you remember, I told you that? And you said there wasn’t any radar!” “But there isn’t any radar,” she says—and for the first time Agate has a small voice. I am screaming at her but her voice is small.” (page 183) What is happening internally with Simon? Why do you think he is unleashing his anger at Agate? Why is it significant that her voice has become small?
76. “The bell rings, a real hammer hitting a real bell, sounding like a real catastrophe. My body jerks again—like it has wanted to with every bell, thirteen times a day for four months—but this time I let it. This time I turn and run.” (pages 183–84) For four months, Simon has had to endure the sound of the school bell, which is so triggering to him. Why do you think he runs away this time?
77. Simon and his dad have a conversation on page 185: “They should have looked out the window, if they wanted to know where I was. They built me a shrine, Dad. . . .” “‘Like you were dead,’ he says.” The students of GNB made a shrine to show their support for Simon. When Simon saw the shrine, however, he was triggered and he ran away from the school. The GNB students had good intentions but their plan backfired. Do you think it’s a good idea to first ask *how* a person wants to be comforted and supported before we take action? How can this help us to become more empathetic and caring friends?
78. Mom tells them the news that Frank Semple’s body rolled off onto Highway 385 and Simon bursts into laughter (page 188). The family ponders changing their last names or moving to another bizarrely named town like Tightwad, Missouri. The phone keeps ringing even as “my parents lean over me, arms around each other, and it feels like they’re angels spreading their wings over me like in a picture” (page 189). In the midst of all that has happened in one morning and all that is swirling around them, how does the O’Keeffe family support and love one another? How is this a powerful force for a family who has experienced trauma? How does it make you feel to know that simply being next to someone and quietly offering your presence can be a strong show of support?

CHAPTER 20 *In Which My Dad Goes Black Sabbath*

79. During Sunday mass, Deacon O’Keeffe says, “It’s not a blessing that my son, Simon, was spared. . . . It’s not part of some plan. If I believed that then I’d also have to believe there was a reason that the others were killed. That it was part of God’s plan to take them” (page 195). Deacon O’Keeffe tells the church that there was no higher reason or plan for his son to be spared while his classmates were killed. If there is no “ultimate plan,” then life’s events, whether jubilant or crushing, happen at random. Without debating for any particular side, sit with the deacon’s message for a minute and discuss with your partner or group the following questions: How did you react initially to the deacon’s message within a church setting? Why is it ironic? How is it even more significant considering that his son was the lone survivor? How did you feel when the deacon read the names of the dead? Who was this sermon for? (the congregation, town, Simon’s Dad, Simon, the families of the fallen, etc.) How do you think the parents of the deceased classmates would have reacted to this sermon? How did Simon and his mother react to the sermon?
80. “All of a sudden Kev steps in and gives me a huge hug. His holy robes are scratchy and he’s sweating in them. ‘Simon, I was a crap friend. I knew my mom was— That you didn’t— But I didn’t know what to

say.” (page 198) How was this exactly what Simon was waiting for? How do you think Simon felt when he hugged Kevin back? What did Simon have the courage to finally tell Kevin?

CH. 21 *In Which the Avengers Assemble*

81. “The last time I saw Agate I shouted at her. She rubbed my back and I *screamed* at her. Her voice went so so small. . . . What if my best friend has nothing to say?” (page 203) Why is it significant that Agate’s voice became small? What do you think Simon should do to make amends with Agate and also improve their relationship?
82. When Simon and Agate finally see each other, she tells him that she’s been thinking about him and Einstein’s theory of time: “You said you wanted to be Simon from Now, right. . . . That’s what’s important. Simon from Now and not Simon from Then. . . . So I thought I should tell you that there isn’t any now” (page 208). Agate concludes, “There is nothing special about now” (page 209). What do you think about Agate’s interpretation of Einstein’s theory? Do you think time is like a field in which we can simply stand somewhere different, moving forward, backward, or staying still? If we believe that the Now is open to interpretation and we can make it what we want, are we bound to the past? What kind of choices can we make according to this theory? What kind of life can Simon lead?
83. “It’s amazing how much Hercules has grown: He’s still a puppy, but he’s a puppy with long legs and a let’s-go attitude now, not a round little ball of fuzz and shyness.” (page 210) How does Hercules’s physical growth parallel Simon’s personal growth in this novel?

CHAPTER 22 *In Which the Avengers Steal an Extension Cord*

84. “I remember that with both things—the puppy and the alien message—both times I did the Simon Says Special. I didn’t say yes and I didn’t say no; I tried not to stir anything up at all.” (page 219) According to Simon, he has wanted to fly under the radar since he arrived at GNB. He felt that the only way to move forward from his past was to do so quietly and maybe alone. Along the way, he developed quirky friends and his family developed a reputation as eccentrics. Flying under the radar and being independent can have its benefits, but how can having our own distinct voice and connection to a community help us, especially when we are experiencing difficulties or challenges? How is Simon changing from someone who couldn’t find his own opinion to someone who is decisive and can speak his mind? How can this shape his life and future?

CHAPTER 23 *In Which I Get Things All Lined Up*

85. “I think about nothing. Or everything. I think about attics and tree houses and supply cupboards. I think about my old dead friends and my new alive friends and my dog. Agate said there was nothing special about now but it kind of feels like there’s something special about now.” (page 230) When Simon is in the treehouse with Agate and Kevin, he thinks about the past, present, and even the future since they are planning to send a space message. The different phases of time seem to blend together in this peaceful moment. Why does Simon feel like there’s something special about this particular moment? What does it tell you that Simon is able to remember snippets of the past while thinking about the future and feel comfortable doing so? Finally, what do you think about this quote by Albert Einstein: “The distinction between past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion”?

CHAPTER 24 *In Which I Am Promoted to Teenager*

86. “I like Lego because it’s hard but it’s step-by-step doable. On the other hand, if you miss a step, then you hit a problem you can’t solve without going backward. . . . There must be some mistake somewhere, something out of place, where I just can’t move on.” (pages 240–41) What is the challenging part of working with Legos? How can this be a metaphor for life? When you felt stuck and like you couldn’t move forward, what helped you? What do you think can help Simon to move on, and do you think he can do that without revisiting the past? Mr. and Mrs. O’Keeffe have agreed to do an interview with PBS about their lives after Eagle Crest. Simon’s mom apologizes to him and explains that this seems to be the only way to fend off the media. “‘That’s okay, I mean. We tried vanishing. . . .’ I’m repeating myself and my voice is cracking and yet I kind of mean it. I kinda am okay. ‘Maybe people will want to hear that I lived. That we all lived.’” (page 247) How does Simon’s response tell you that he has gone through a significant transformation since the beginning of the novel? Which Simon is he: Simon of the Past, Present, or Future?

CHAPTER 25 *In Which I Pull the Trigger*

87. “I’m a bottle of soda and someone gave me a big shake, like I’m just going to bubble over and maybe explode. It’s uncomfortable, but it’s not the same kind of uncomfortable I’ve been feeling since Eagle Crest. I mean: It doesn’t feel like something terrible is going to happen. Just like something’s going to happen. I’m jittery.” (page 252) Why do you think Simon feels like he’s going to explode like a shaken bottle of soda? Is it important that he’s able to make this distinction between excitement and anxiety?
88. “I’ve got my back to them but I know they’re there, my two friends. The long June evening is settling in. Even the smells seem to get thicker this time of day. I can smell goats, and something different than goats that’s probably emus, and the sweet green smell of somebody nearby cutting hay.” (page 254) Is it significant that Simon is using all his senses to take in the environment? How is this different from the previous times he has had to use grounding techniques?
89. “Something big has happened. It’s happened inside me, like . . . like something getting born, stretching out, like I just hatched and have wings. I feel light and heavy and super weird and like I could be a tornado and like I could run across America forever.” (page 258) More and more, Simon is able to feel things in his body. He is less numb and more connected, not only to himself but to others and his environment. He feels a big shift within himself, like he is being born as a bird and hatching out of an egg—an incredibly vivid and sensory-rich description. Do you think it is a coincidence that Simon feels this transformation in the safety of his friends, in his new hometown? Why do you think this change happens within Simon at the moment the three friends send the space message?

CHAPTER 26 *In Which I Google Alpacas*

90. When Simon gets a homemade shirt from Agate that says *I survived the Eagle Crest school shooting and all I got was this lousy T-shirt*, this is his response: “The thing that was bubbling in me starts to bubble out. I don’t even know what it’s going to be, but it turns out to be laughter. I giggle like a preschooler, and I throw my arms around Agate. . . . ‘Thank you, Agate. . . . It’s perfect and I am never, ever going to wear it.’” (page 262) What does it mean that Simon can laugh over something that had brought him grief and pain until recently? How has Agate’s genuine personality, deep compassion, and deadpan sense of humor cracked Simon’s shell? When was the last time that Simon laughed, and how is it similar or different from this time?
91. “It feels so weird to be this normal. We drive the normal car. We check into the normal hotel room in the normal way. . . . The [hotel] room is like a box of average, and it’s like it could average us out until

we vanish.” (page 263) In running away from his previous life, Simon thinks he wants to be “normal.” Does he want to be normal, or does he want to be happy? Why do you think people change themselves to fit in or strive to fit a certain standard? If there is an actual definition for “normal,” do you think Simon wants to be it? How about you?

92. “They’ll probably use the picture from fifth grade—the school picture—day picture that they ran everywhere like I was a kid on a milk carton. I don’t like that picture either, not anymore. Maybe my parents will give them a new picture. Some family shot of me rolling around with my puppy, or fighting off a peacock with a broken umbrella. That would be better.” (page 265) Simon of the Now has a preference for the photo that might be used by PBS when they air his family’s segment. What does Simon’s preference tell you about how he identifies himself in his new life?
93. “I wonder if I’m not the only one who wants to be known for something other than Eagle Crest. I wonder if I’m not the only one who’s going to get his wish.” (page 268) Who is Simon referring to? What makes him think this? Do you think this is a comforting thought?
94. “I realize I can’t wait to get home. Back to Kevin, and Agate . . . back to Grin And Bear It, Nebraska. Somehow, somewhere along the way, it got to be home.” (page 269) When Simon misses his best friends, he also misses GNB. When do you think GNB became more than just a place for Simon to hide from his past? How did GNB become his present and future?

CHAPTER 27 *Release the Emus!*

95. Describe how Simon is able to comfort Agate on pages 274–75. Do you think he learned well from his friend? What does it tell you that Simon is now able to comfort someone else?
96. “I’m not going to be on the bottom of the pile. I’m going to be standing. I’m going to be screaming. I’m going to be— A face comes into view. . . . A hand with something in it. A man. I shout at the top of my lungs, spin to the gap in the railing, and throw myself into the sky.” (page 278) In psychology, a “trigger” is a stimulus that causes a painful memory to resurface. A trigger can be any sensory reminder of the traumatic event: a sound, sight, smell, physical sensation, or even a time of day or season.” (PsychCentral, “What Are Triggers, and How Do They Form?,” <https://psychcentral.com/lib/what-is-a-trigger#:~:text=Recap,to%20reach%20out%20for%20support>) In this intense scene as the three friends feel cornered in their small treehouse, Simon remembers the day the shooter came to his classroom at Eagle Crest. He decides that this time, he will not be found at the “bottom of the pile.” He decides that he will do something—that he will protect himself, even if it means jumping off the tree. Even though we know the jump will most likely result in injury, can you try and take Simon’s perspective? In empathizing with him, does it make sense that Simon jumped from the approaching man, rather than wait for something to happen?

CHAPTER 28 *In Which We Are Driven Out of Grin and Bear It*

97. “The blood is coming from her—there’s a cut that goes from her eyebrow, past her ear, into her hair, and it’s bleeding a lot. A lot, a lot. There’s a broken branch under her. I think that cut her. It’s not even a cut, it’s like a tear, like she’s torn open.” (page 281) Who is Simon describing, and what has happened to her?
98. Kevin interrupts his mom, who has been reprimanding him about their space message plan. He tells her: “Are you thinking about [Simon] now? Because he’s hurt, Mom, Simon and Agate got hurt, and you’re still talking about science’ . . . And Kevin bellows: ‘If you want me to have choices sometimes you’re not going to like them!’” (page 286) Simon was able to choose his response to Mr. Bagshott and Agate was able to choose how she would protect Simon. Do you think Kevin felt free to make his own choice in that panic-filled moment at the treehouse? How can the adults in our lives encourage us to

make our own decisions, even if they don't always agree?

99. Mrs. Van der Zwaan loads both Agate and Simon into her car, and they set off for the hospital. Simon has his swollen ankles in frozen vegetables, and Agate is bleeding from her head, trying not to fall asleep. Still, the best friends agree that they're glad they did all of it: the good, the bad, and the weird. Then something inside Simon "cracks" and he begins to cry (page 288). If Simon doesn't regret enacting their plan and even how things ended, why is he crying?
100. "It's like, somehow, [saints are] holy because awful stuff happened to them. . . . We only know the one part of their life, and it's the most awful part." (page 289) When Simon thinks about the Catholic saints, he realizes that it's not right that they gain sainthood only through suffering and death. He thinks it's unfair that people associate the saints with tragedy when they are about so much more than that. Is Simon only thinking about the saints, or someone else?

CHAPTER 29 *The Special Now*

101. "It's not a huge hospital, and it's not super busy, but it's got that hospital fug-green color and that hospital smell that's sharp and sour and makes you feel sick. I take a big slow breath in and wait for the flashbacks. They don't come. It's almost weird." (page 291) What was Simon waiting for? Why did it feel "weird" when it didn't happen?
102. "[Kevin] didn't get hurt, but he did get left alone to explain about the stolen microwave and the prime numbers and how Agate didn't want to be lonely and I didn't want to be hidden anymore." (page 293) How is this a completely adequate summary of the space message plan?
103. "When my family fights about who the traumatized one is, I always say it's me, and Mom's on my side, but Dad always says yes it is me, but also it is all of us. . . . I hear him, and know he's kind of right. It is all of us." (page 293) Disagreements can shed light on a point of view that we might not have otherwise considered. Simon says that he's the traumatized one, and his father agrees but also adds that they are all traumatized. Even in trauma, Simon's parents stay close to him and walk with him through his highs and lows. How important is it for trauma survivors to have support from their family and community?
104. "I'm always going to be . . . the kid in the pile. The kid in the picture with my hands over my head. But also, I'm always going to be the kid in the red hoodie in the background of that one church-alpaca video. . . . The kid with the two weird friends who stole a microwave and subtracted four minutes from the universe. I'm Simon from wNow, but it's like Agate said: Now doesn't mean what you think it means." (page 294) When Simon first arrives in GNB, he tries to distance himself from Eagle Crest, but he still feels stuck in the past. As the story progresses and Simon begins building relationships with those around him, he begins to move forward. According to Agate's explanation of Einstein's theory of time, why isn't Simon's past all that significant?
105. "I don't feel happy, exactly. But I do feel . . . looser. Lighter. Like I did when I was falling. I didn't shelter in place this time. I saved myself. I was an idiot, but I saved myself. I hear myself saying, 'I want to talk to them. I mean. I want to go out the real doors.'" (pages 300–01) How significant was it for Simon that he didn't stay put but actually did something when he felt scared? Who does Simon want to talk to, and how does this show how much he has healed and grown? How different are the reactions from Agate and Simon's parents when he says that he wants to talk?
106. "I remember telling [Agate] that I wanted to be Simon from Now—meaning not Simon Says Simon, the kid on Google, the frozen kid in the photo." (page 304) Simon did not want his identity to be defined by the media's portrayal of him as a victim, nor did he want his personality and voice to be permanently altered by his trauma. How was Simon able to break away from these different identifications? How did his friends and family help him achieve this?
107. "I still don't get [Einstein's theory on time]. . . . But I can feel it. It feels like falling: weightless, timeless,

and free. If I were a saint I'd be patron of both school shootings and radio telescopes. I'd be Simon the Astonishing, who could fly. Simon from Now, with a whole past, and a whole future." (page 305) Simon no longer feels bound by the past—both distant and recent. He feels so weightless that he could be a saint who can fly, someone who is in control of his own destiny. He is no longer Simon from Eagle Crest or Simon from GNB; he is much more than where he came from or what he experienced. What do you think he means about having a “whole past” and a “whole future”?

108. At the end of the book, Agate explains that “there is no special now” and uses a pen to draw “stars” on Simon’s arm. The stars represent all the tiny “now” moments. “Slowly, slowly, Agate Van der Zwaan covers me in stars” (page 305). Think back to all the small moments that Agate and Simon shared. Did these day-to-day moments synthesize to become something bigger than the both of them? How did Simon’s friendships with Agate and Kevin lead him to this moment of enlightenment? What can we learn from Agate’s elucidation that rather than focusing on one “now,” we can live with an infinite number of “nows,” like the stars in the sky? Do you believe that this is more special than one “now”?

RESOURCES

Within *Simon Sort of Says* several topics are introduced that may raise some uncomfortable feelings for young people (or adults!) reading the book. Some young people may be more susceptible to these based upon their own previous experiences of anxiety or a traumatic event. If a young person that you are sharing the book with has any difficult feelings, questions, or concerns that arise, please give them the opportunity to talk these through. If you have any ongoing concerns following a conversation, then please seek further advice or support.

YOU CAN FIND MORE INFORMATION ABOUT TRAUMA AND ANXIETY FROM THE FOLLOWING:

Knowles, Sue. (2018). *My Anxiety Handbook: Getting Back on Track*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Knowles, Sue, et al. *My Life after Trauma Handbook: Surviving and Thriving Using Psychological Approaches*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2022.

TRAUMA IS COMMON. HELP IS AVAILABLE.

The term isn’t used in this book, but Simon has Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD.

PTSD is common in kids: the National Center for PTSD in the United States estimates that about one in twenty children and teens will develop PTSD. Like Simon, some people develop PTSD after witnessing or experiencing violence, but PTSD can follow illness, injury, abuse, neglect, loss—any kind of trauma.

If you have or think you might have PTSD, here are some places to learn more and get help:

National Child Traumatic Stress Network—www.NCTSN.org

Resources for parents and kids dealing with trauma

KidsHealth: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)—KidsHealth.org/en/parents/ptsd.html

Resources for understanding and dealing with PTSD

Kids Help Phone (Canada)—KidsHelpPhone.ca

24/7 hotline kids can call, text, or chat to get support for any mental health issue

Teen Line (US)—www.TeenLine.org/youth

Volunteer-run hotline kids can anonymously call or chat for support on a variety of topics

Reaching out is an enormous step, especially if you're grappling with shame or secrets. It might take a lot of courage. I salute your courage.

Finally, if you have been through trauma and you have PTSD, please know that it's only a part of who you are. What you've survived might have shaped you, but it doesn't define you. You are a whole human being, and you are valuable. You are covered in stars.

POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS

Throughout *Simon Sort of Says*, Simon experiences several post-traumatic stress reactions. How someone responds to a trauma event depends upon a number of different factors, and some people may go back to their everyday lives without many things having changed. However, for many people, especially those who experience such a significant trauma as Simon did, they can experience a sudden and intense period of stress following the event, where they may have intense psychological and bodily reactions. These reactions are a way of their body and mind trying to process what has happened and protect them from any further traumatic events. Usually, the post-traumatic reactions dissipate within a few months, but if they continue into the longer-term and impact upon the person's daily functioning, then they might start to meet criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS REACTIONS

The following are some of the ways in which a traumatic event can affect our psychological and bodily functioning:

- **Hypervigilance**—We may become “hypervigilant” to potential threats in our environment, we may always be on the lookout for danger, we may seem on edge or jumpy, or may overreact to everyday things.
- **Body ready to react**—When we detect a potential threat, our amygdala (the “threat detection center” of our brain) releases adrenaline, which prepares our bodies to respond to the threat. Our heart rate quickens, our muscles become tense, we tend to breathe more quickly (or gasp and hold our breath), our senses can become heightened, and we can experience a sudden burst of energy.
- **Fight/flight response**—We may then become easily triggered into our “fight/flight” survival responses, where we may hit out, throw things or shout (fight), or may try to get out the situation quickly or hide (flight). When our survival responses are triggered, we react before we have the chance to think, as this gives us the best possible chance of survival.
- **Excess energy**—If our survival response is triggered, we can be left with additional energy and tension in our body with no way to discharge it. Therefore, we may feel on edge, jumpy and restless.
- **Freeze or shut-down response**—We may also get stuck with our “freeze” (rigid muscles) or “collapse/shut-down” survival responses (body and mind “shut down”).
- **Fragmented memories**—During a traumatic event, our survival response affects the way that the brain processes memories. As the prefrontal cortex is less accessible at these times, the brain is less able to collate the facts of what happened, the order that it happened, and that the traumatic event has ended. Often we may have fragmented memories of the event with stronger sensory cues (as the main part of the brain involved in sensory processing tends to work even harder when we are experiencing traumatic events). Therefore, sensory memories (e.g., a smell or sound) may suddenly bring on intense traumatic memories.
- **Intrusive thoughts and night terrors**—The fragmented memories of the traumatic event can make it difficult for our brains to process and file the memories away. Therefore, the brain and body may feel that the traumatic event is still happening and has not ended. This can lead to the brain replaying the traumatic event again and again in an attempt to process it. This can lead to intrusive, often distressing, memories (memories or pictures of the event that can get stuck in the person's mind) and night terrors, or flashbacks.

- **Flashbacks**—When we experience a flashback, it can feel like the traumatic event is happening again right now. At these times, our minds and bodies are replaying the traumatic experience in a way that feel very real. Sometimes people describe this as like watching a very realistic film of the traumatic event.
- **Dissociative responses**—Dissociation is an automatic survival strategy that our body and mind can use to lessen the physical and emotional pain that we might feel during a traumatic event. When we dissociate, we become “cut off” from our bodies, minds, emotions, or our surroundings. It can feel like a disconnection or detachment between our mind and body, and people often describe feeling “zoned out” or that things around them do not seem real. Once the traumatic event has ended, some people may continue to dissociate at times when they experience stress, a threat, or a sensory trigger.
- **Intense emotional responses**—Following a traumatic event, we may experience feelings of powerlessness, distress, intense anxiety, or many other big emotional responses. We may feel overwhelmed by these emotions, and it may feel as if our “emotional dial” has been turned up somewhat.
- **A change in the way that we view ourselves, other people and the world**—As we try to make sense of what has happened, our narrative and understanding of ourselves, other people and the world may change. For example, how safe we are, how strong we are, how trustworthy other people are, and how stable and predictable the world is.
- **Avoidance**—A really common, but understandable, response to trauma is avoidance, where we might try to avoid people and situations that remind of us what we experienced or avoid any potential future threats. This can often really get in the way of our everyday lives and being able to move on following a traumatic event.

WAYS OF COPING

During the book, Simon uses a couple of different strategies to help himself to cope with his post-traumatic reactions.

Breathing—When we feel anxious or panicky, we tend to breathe differently. Often we will breathe quickly in a shallow manner and may hyperventilate (which can lead to feelings of dizziness). Alternatively, we may gasp and stop breathing temporarily. Research has shown that a person’s breathing patterns can impact upon how they physically feel, and therefore, if we are able to regulate our breathing at times when we are feeling anxious or panicked, this can quickly help us to feel calmer again. There are lots of different breathing techniques, but some top tips are to take deep breaths (from your diaphragm rather than your chest), try to release any tension from the shoulders, chest, and upper body and make sure that you are sat in an open posture, and take long, slow breaths.

Grounding strategies—In the book, Simon uses a grounding strategy “Naming” as a way of coping when he is feeling anxious and experiencing post-traumatic reactions. When we are feeling anxious, we often tend to focus upon what is happening inside our bodies (our interoception, and we tend to pay less attention to our external surroundings (exteroception) and what we can see, smell, taste, hear, and physically feel. This can mean that when we notice that our body feels tense, we are anxious and breathing quickly, and we assume that there is a real threat, whereas if we were able to notice our surroundings more, we would realise that we are safe.

There are different ways of doing the “Naming” exercise, but in its simplest form it means paying attention to what is happening in your surroundings and naming them (either out loud or in your head). Simon uses the following version:

Name five things you can see . . . Name three things you can hear . . . Name one thing you can taste . . .

Name four things you can touch . . . Name two things you can smell . . .

When this exercise ends, the person should have shifted their focus to their surroundings, which can help them to become “grounded” in the here and now.

POST-READING ACTIVITIES

TRUE DESTINY

Directions: Simon feels that his life and identity are permanently marred by the Eagle Crest school shooting. He spends most of the novel trying to run from his past. He tells his best friend, Agate: “I just want to be normal, I want to live my normal life in Grin And Bear It . . . I want to be the kid who has that life and not be Simon O’Keeffe ever again” (page 110). Simon doesn’t want to be defined by an event that was out of his control, but he feels helpless to change this and steer himself in a new direction. Slowly, by living day to day in his new town, Simon is able to feel more like himself. But it is through building and strengthening relationships that Simon is truly able to live the life that he wants. Consider this quote by the Catholic monk Thomas Merton: “Love is our true destiny. We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone—we find it with another.” How do love, friendship, and community enable Simon to create his own destiny—one that is not defined by his past or other opinions? Please use three examples, quotes, or details from the book to support your answer.

[illegible]

SAINTLY FRIENDS

Directions: “If I were a saint I’d be patron of both school shootings and radio telescopes. I’d be Simon the Astonishing, who could fly.” (page 305) Two miracles are required before a person can be canonized as a Catholic saint. Simon already knows what his power and two miracles would be. If Simon, Agate, and Kevin could all be sainted, what would that look like?

Simon the Astonishing	Agate the _____	Kevin the _____
Flying Power	_____ Power	_____ Power
Miracle 1 Eagle Crest Survivor Miracle 2 SETI Messenger	Miracle 1 _____ Miracle 2 _____	Miracle 1 _____ Miracle 2 _____



PLAIN TALK EXCLUSIVE: INTERVIEW WITH SIMON O'KEEFFE

Directions: The book ends with Simon and Agate waiting to talk to reporters. Imagine yourself as Simon and answer the following interview questions for GNB's very own *Plain Talk*.

PLAIN TALK REPORTER STAN DEMAN: Simon, thank you for agreeing to do this interview. What made you change your mind about talking to the media?

SIMON O'KEEFFE: _____

DEMAN: Is it true that you and your friends faked a message from space? Why did you do this, and how did you obtain a microwave?

O'KEEFFE: _____

DEMAN: You suffered a traumatic experience in your previous town. Can you describe what happened to you? How do you feel as the lone survivor?

O'KEEFFE: _____

DEMAN: How were you able to move forward after your experience? Do you have a message for other trauma survivors?

O'KEEFFE: _____

DEMAN: Why did you and your family decide to relocate to GNB? Do you feel you made the right choice?

O'KEEFFE: _____

DEMAN: You and your parents have a reputation for being independent thinkers. What would you say to those who are not fans?

O'KEEFFE: _____

NAME THAT ANIMAL!

Directions: Author Erin Bow weaves a variety of animals into her novel, and they run from the ordinary (cute puppies!) to the extraordinary (angry peacock, anyone?). Let's take a closer look into the wild world of GNB's animal kingdom by completing this chart. When you are finished, try and see which animal you identify with the most.

Animal	Physical Appearance	Attributes (qualities, features, strengths, weaknesses)	Character(s) associated with animal (names of animal and owner)	Simon's perspective toward the animal	Fun facts (use details or quotes from the book or other sources)
Alpaca					
Emu					
Peacock					
Puppy					
Goat					

LIVIN' LA VIDA NQZ

Directions: The National Quiet Zone (NQZ) has no internet, no cell phones, no TV, no radio, and no microwave ovens. For Simon and his family, it's the perfect place to restart their lives. If you had to relocate to the NQZ, what would your life be like? Write a diary entry detailing one full day of living in the NQZ during the school year. Make sure to include: what school life and learning are like; how you and other students socialize and communicate with one another; what kind of activities you do outside of school; what your home life is like—including the food you eat and maybe miss.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

About the Guide Writer: **Veronica Kim** was born in Seoul, Korea, and raised in NJ in a bilingual, bicultural home. She graduated from Johns Hopkins University, where she focused on East Asian Studies and Writing, and holds an MAT from Fairleigh Dickinson University. She is an ESL teacher and enjoys working with her young students and learning about their diverse backgrounds. She loves reading multicultural, inclusive work with her children, and looks forward to seeing their generation find their authentic voice.

About the Psychologist: **Dr. Sue Knowles**, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, Lead for Child and Family Services at CMCAFS and Author of *My Anxiety Handbook* and *My Life After Trauma Handbook*

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Simon Sort of Says

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