

Literature Circle Guide to *The Green Glass Sea* by Ellen Klages

Book Summary

It's 1943, and 11-year-old Dewey Kerrigan is traveling west to live with her scientist father. No one, neither her father nor the military guardians who accompany her, will tell her exactly where she is going. When she reaches Los Alamos, New Mexico, she learns why: her father is working on a top-secret government program. In Los Alamos, Dewey gets to know eminent scientists, starts tinkering with her own mechanical projects, and becomes friends with a budding artist who is as much of a misfit as she is. All the while, she has no idea how the Manhattan Project her father is working on is about to change the world. This book's fresh prose and fascinating subject make it unlike anything you've read before.

Author Information

Ellen Klages lives in San Francisco, California. Her story "Basement Magic" won the Nebula Award for Best Novelette in 2005. Her short fiction has been published widely, and she is a graduate of the Clarion South writing workshop. Ellen also serves on the Motherboard of the James Tiptree, Jr. Award (www.tiptree.org). When she's not writing fiction, she collects old toys and sells them on eBay. She is currently working on a sequel to *The Green Glass Sea*.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. At the beginning of the book, Dewey is sitting on the front steps of Mrs. Kovack's house in St. Louis. Who is she hoping will appear? **Dewey is sitting on the front porch waiting for her father.**
2. According to the book, what is a "fizzler"? A "stinker"? **On page 51, the narrator explains that fizzlers are physicists and stinkers are chemists.**
3. What sort of terrain surrounds the Hill? Why is this important, given the work the scientists are doing there? **There are numerous descriptions of the land surrounding the Hill. On page 34: "She watches the desert land go by the window, brown and foreign-looking, with distant mountains on either side of the road." On page 119: "The Hill was a natural fortress, a flat mesa fissured with canyons on three sides. The land didn't slope down, it dropped off abruptly, vertically, with sheer cliffs..." One page 306: "The land was flat and endless, bounded by craggy brown mountain canyons on one side and distant dusky blue ridges on the far horizons." Readers should indicate they understand that the government did not want anyone to know what was happening on the Hill and that the location was chosen because it was isolated and difficult to approach undetected.**
4. It is now 1944. Several months have passed since Dewey arrived from St. Louis. Based on what you read beginning in the chapter titled "Jumping Rope," how has she adjusted to life on the Hill? **On page 55, Dewey says to her father,**

“I’m going to the dump. Some of the labs are moving into the Gamma Building, now that it’s done, and people always throw out good stuff when they move. ...I need some bigger gears and some knobs and dials.” Also in that chapter, the narrator explains, “In the nine months that she’d lived here, Dewey had explored almost every inch of the project...” (p. 57) On her way to and from the dump, Dewey meets her friends Charlie and Jack, and then Suze, Barbara, Betty, and Joyce, who call her ‘Screwey Dewey.’” Based on all of this, readers should infer that Dewey has explored the Hill and discovered certain places she likes to go, especially the dump. Also, she has met some people with whom she is friendly, like Charlie and Jack, but also people who make her feel like an outsider, like Joyce, Suze, and the other girls.

5. On page 224, Suze and Dewey come home to find a man they know as “Oppie” sitting on the couch. According to the text, who is Oppie? What do the girls think is the reason he has come to the house? **The narrator identifies Oppie as Robert Oppenheimer, the head of the whole Hill. The girls think his visit is related to a physical confrontation they have just had with Joyce (p. 224).**
6. Patriotism is very important to the residents of the Hill. Choose a character in the story and list two things he or she does that are patriotic. Then briefly explain why each action you have described is patriotic. **There are many examples of acts that could be described as patriotic. For example, on page 132, Terry Gordon explains to Suze, “Daddy and I put our careers on hold to come and work in the labs here.” She goes on to imply that hosting Dewey in Jimmy Kerrigan’s absence would be an additional patriotic act. Another example might involve Jimmy Kerrigan. He comes to work at the Hill and is willing to spend time away from his daughter, all in service of his country. Readers might also argue that simply following the rules of the Hill—especially the rules concerning secrecy—or using spare parts found at the dump, are also patriotic acts.**
7. Suze tells Dewey that the rock with Shazam painted on it will give them secret powers, like wisdom or strength. If you had a Shazam rock, what secret power would you want it to give you, and why? **Answers will vary, but look for readers who pick up on the theme of the powers discussed in the book. The powers, which are based on the names of mythological characters, are virtues rather than abilities. Thus, the ability to fly or become invisible would be acceptable, but courage, humor, or creativity might be even better answers in the context of the book.**
8. Using examples from the text, show how Dewey uses numbers and patterns to comfort herself during difficult situations. Why do you think numbers are so important to her? **On page 13, Dewey soothes herself on the long train ride from St. Louis by reading the timetable. After she learns that her father has died, Dewey “starts saying the multiplication tables,**

- fast, under her breath, as if it were a chant that will keep all other thoughts at bay.” (p. 237) On page 238, the narrator explains why numbers are comforting to her. “Numbers don’t leave. Numbers don’t die. They go on for eternity, infinity, and there is comfort in that.”
9. On page 280, the residents of the Hill have learned that “the gadget” works. Mr. Gordon says, “The genie’s out of the bottle, Terry. No way to put it back now.” What do you think he means by this? Choose two characters from the story and briefly describe how each character reacts to the successful test of the gadget. On page 278, the narrator describes a cheering crowd parading through the Hill. They are celebrating the successful detonation of the gadget. More specifically, there are three characters whose reactions could be described by readers: 1) On page 279, a jubilant Dr. Gordon kisses his wife and pours himself a drink. Also, on page 293, the narrator implies that Dr. Gordon is excited about other uses of atomic energy. 2) Dewey, however, begins to fret about her own future when she learns that the gadget was successful. (p. 282) The narrator says, “The Gordons were leaving? [Dewey had] been braced for that, ever since the gadget had worked.” (p. 287) 3) On page 284, Terry Gordon debates with a group of other scientists, some of whom think the bomb should be used. She says, “They can’t use it. Not on civilians.”
10. Late in the story, Dewey uses the word “kinship” to describe her relationship with Mrs. Gordon. Why do you think these two characters get along so well? Do you think Dewey considers any other adult besides her father a friend? The use of the word “kinship” appears on page 243. The first hint about the reason for the kinship between Dewey and Mrs. Gordon can be found on page 112. Dewey has just explained a contraption she has built. After Mrs. Gordon leaves, the narrator says, “[Dewey] had never known a real woman scientist before, just men like Papa.” Then, on page 244, Mrs. Gordon tells Dewey about getting her first chemistry set as a young girl. She concludes the conversation with a wink, “as if she and Dewey were part of a club.” Based on exchanges such as this, readers should recognize that an interest in science is one important reason for the kinship, and that Mrs. Gordon is a role model. Readers may also suggest that to Dewey, Mrs. Gordon is a mother figure.
11. On page 290, Dewey thinks to herself, “People don’t change.” Do you agree with this statement? In your opinion, does Suze change during the story? Use evidence from the text to support your answer. Answers to the first question will vary, but answers to the second questions will likely be affirmative. Readers should be able to contrast Suze’s behavior at the beginning of the story with her behavior later on. At the beginning, Suze is part of the group with Joyce and the other girls who call Dewey “Screwy Dewey.” Toward the end of the book, Suze befriends Dewey, even going out looking for her when Dewey runs away to

the tree house. Some of the significant intermediate steps in Suze's growth include: Suze's negative reaction to the idea of Dewey sleeping in her room (p. 131); Suze telling Dewey, "you better not walk with me." (p. 154); Suze intentionally knocking over Dewey's cigar box and then apologizing (p. 172); the girls celebrating the end of the war together (p. 197); Suze standing up for Dewey when Joyce and the other girls harass them on the way home from the dump (p. 222); and Suze coming after Dewey, who has run away, and giving her the Shazam stone, a symbol of their friendship. (pp. 301-304)

12. At the very end of the story, Dewey and the Gordons are driving through the desert when they hear the beginning of a radio broadcast. Reread the portion of the broadcast printed in the book. Then make a prediction. What do you think the passengers in the car would have heard if Suze had not changed the station? **The portion of the broadcast that Dewey and the Gordons hear is just a fragment: "...onto the Japanese city of Hiroshima this morning..." (p. 318) There are no right or wrong answers to this question. Readers may know already that the broadcast pertains to the detonation of the atomic bomb. This knowledge might come from other sources, or be based on close reading of the book, which, after all, is about the development of the atomic bomb. Even for those who do not recognize the significance of Hiroshima in the sentence should at least infer from the word "onto" that the action probably relates to something falling from an airplane.**
13. Reread the first few sentences of the first chapter and the first few sentences of the chapter beginning on page 41. What is different about the way the author is using language? Why do you think the author chose to do this? **The first 40 pages of the book, which cover Dewey's train ride to New Mexico, are written in the third person present. On page 41, the story begins to focus on Suze, and the narration changes to third person past tense. Most of the remainder of the story is also written in the past tense. However, the chapter in which Dewey copes with the death of her father is also in present tense. The second question is open-ended. For example, some readers might suggest that the two chapters written in the present tense are about two emotionally trying times for Dewey, and that the present tense makes the action more immediate.**
14. On page 231, Mrs. Gordon says to Suze, "Dewey's a private person, you know." In your opinion, is this an accurate description of Dewey? Support your answer using examples from the text. **It is possible to make a good case for and against this statement. Dewey does spend a lot of time by herself. But opinions may vary as to whether that is because she is private, or because she is often teased about her limp and her affinity for gadgets. Look for answers that note that Dewey does open up when people take the time to get to know her. For example, on page 111, she tells Dr. Gordon all about her inventions the first time they**

meet, and on page 213 she doesn't hesitate when Suze asks her about her brace. On the other hand, when she hears her father has died, Dewey chooses to be by herself. Also, this is Suze's description of Dewey earlier in the book: "Dewey didn't play with the other kids. She spent every recess at one of the picnic tables next to the playground, fiddling with her stupid radio, or some broken garbage with wires and springs, like it was homework." (p. 65) Again, some readers may argue that she is alone by choice, while others may argue that she is alone because the others tease her.

15. Secrecy and rules are a part of life for the residents of the Hill. There are off-limits areas, no phones, and the government censors mail. In your own words, explain how you would feel if you were a resident of Los Alamos. Would these restrictions frustrate you or would you view them as a way to contribute to the war effort? **This question is entirely open-ended. Some readers may recognize that the residents of Los Alamos saw the extra secrecy as part of the war effort and that it would be unusual in the context of the story for someone to react with frustration. Other readers may stress context less and simply answer based on how it would feel to be transported to Los Alamos, where the rules are very different from those in the modern world.**

Note: These questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-6; Application: 7-8 Analysis: 9-10; Synthesis: 11-12; Evaluation: 13-15.

Activities

1. Reread the letter on page 190 that Jimmy Kerrigan writes to Dewey from Washington, D.C. Then reread the passage on page 199 in which Dewey explains to Suze what the letter really says. Exchange letters with a classmate, using a code like the one Jimmy Kerrigan used. See if you can break your classmate's code. What information did you try to pass along in secret?
2. Using descriptions from the text, draw a map of the Hill. Include as many places as you can remember from the book. Possible locations to plot on your map might be the Tech PX, the dump, Morganville, and the tree house. Make sure to include a legend for your map. Then, compare your map with a classmate's map. How are the maps similar? How are they different?
3. Dewey and Suze like to read comic books. Some of their favorite characters are Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel, and Captain America. Use a blank sheet of paper and colored pencils or crayons to create your own comic book hero or heroine. Give your character a name. What special powers does he or she have?

References to comic books and comic book characters can be found on pages 87, 151, 181, 195, 202, 242, and 257.

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