

A Reading Group Guide to

Firstborn

By Tor Seidler

About the Book

A young wolf seeks the bravery to be himself in this lyrical homage to challenging societal stereotypes, from the author of National Book Award Finalist *Mean Margaret* and *The Wainscott Weasel*.

Wolves. Predators of the wild. Stalkers of the forests. Born into rankings and expected to live up to their roles. Blue Boy, the alpha male of his pack, is the largest wolf many have ever seen, and his dream is to have a firstborn son who will take after him in every way. But Lamar is not turning out the way his father hoped. Lamar likes to watch butterflies. He worries if his younger siblings fall behind in the hunt. He has little interest in peacocking in front of other clans. Blue Boy grows increasingly dismayed at Lamar's lack of wolf instincts, and then Lamar does the intolerable: he becomes attracted to a coyote. While the other infractions can be begrudgingly tolerated, this one cannot, and the unity of the pack is in jeopardy. Lamar wants to make his family happy, but is doing what is expected of him worth losing the only true friend he's ever had?

Full of bite and beauty that will make you think of *White Fang*, then *Ferdinand*, this story cuts to the heart of what's most important: being true to yourself, and being true to others.

Discussion Questions

1. Maggie's personality comes through immediately in the narrative. Find examples in the first chapter of what she's like. How does she change throughout the novel? Compare the differences in her character at the beginning and at the end.
2. Jackson tells Maggie that "you can't be loyal to others if you're not loyal to your own nature first." What does it mean to be "loyal to your own nature"? Do you think Maggie succeeds in doing so?
3. According to Jackson, "Only winged creatures have souls." What do you think Jackson means by having a soul? Why does Maggie conclude that "some wingless creatures did have souls"?
4. What else does Maggie learn from Jackson? How does he know so much? Describe Jackson and discuss what their friendship shows about each of them.
5. Names are important throughout the story. How does Maggie feel about her name, and why? What does it mean to her when Blue Boy names one of his children after Maggie? Discuss some of the other names and their origins, and if you think they suit the characters.

6. Maggie and Blue Boy are firstborns, which is “a big deal to wolves.” Which other characters are firstborn? Why is being a firstborn important to wolves? Why do you think the author chose *Firstborn* as the title?

7. How do Maggie and Blue Boy become friends? How is their relationship useful to each of them? Blue Boy admits that Maggie has saved his life more than once. How did Maggie save his life? When have the wolves saved Maggie’s life?

8. Describe the appearances and personalities of Alberta, Frick, Lupa, and Raze. How do they interact with each other? How does the dynamic of the pack change at different points, and why?

9. After Maggie hurts her wing, she thinks she may never fly again. However, she eventually regains her ability to fly and realizes that, “You have to lose something to appreciate its true value.” What does she mean? Do you agree? Is this true for any experiences in your life, or anyone you know?

10. Lamar is different from the other wolves in several ways. Describe those differences and how they affect what happens to him. Why does Maggie feel a “real connection” with Lamar?

11. Discuss the relationship between Blue Boy and Lamar. How are they alike and how are they different? What do they agree about? What causes tension between them?

12. Blue Boy tells Lamar to “assert your dominance.” What does Blue Boy mean? How does Lamar assert his dominance? What are the consequences?

13. How does Lamar meet Artemis? What is she like? Describe their relationship and what makes it so unusual.

14. Artemis asks Lamar if he’s in a hierarchy. What is a hierarchy? Can you name the hierarchies among different wolves in the novel? Where does Blue Boy fit in the hierarchy of his wolf pack?

15. Life in the wild is dangerous. Identify some of the injuries that the wolves suffer, and explain how they deal with them. When Sully is hurt, Maggie observes, “hope is the best medicine in the world.” What does she mean by that?

16. Describe the relationship between Blue Boy and Sully, and why Blue Boy is angry with Sully. Compare their relationship to the one between Lamar and Ben, noting similarities and differences.

17. When Sully dies, Maggie says she knows “how littered life is with death.” Talk about the deaths of some of the characters, including Jackson and Sully, and how they affect Maggie and others.

18. How important is the element of setting in this novel? Could it have taken place somewhere else? Why or why not? Consulting the maps, describe different places that Maggie lives and travels, and identify the ones you think are most important to her fate.

Extension Activities

Figures of Speech

The figures of speech in *Firstborn* are drawn from different sources, including nature. Analyze these examples from the text, discussing their source, what they compare, and the effect on the reader:

- a hive of humans
- a tide of sorrow
- a cold claw around my heart
- standing like sentinels
- the last card he'd played
- an eyebrow of snow
- like the whitecaps the wind whipped up
- like a court jester

Vocabulary

Firstborn is filled with carefully chosen vocabulary. Note unfamiliar words as you read and try to define them in context, looking up the definition if needed. Here are some possibilities:

- gingerly
- lee side
- gimcracks
- sinewy
- zenith
- damper
- snide
- agog
- spar
- scabrous
- skulked
- cavorted

For the Birds

Maggie mentions many different birds that she meets. Have pairs of students choose a bird to research. They should use print and digital resources to prepare a multimedia presentation for the class that includes text, images, sounds if possible, and source citations. Two useful websites are the Cornell Lab of Ornithology (www.allaboutbirds.org/) and the Audubon Society (www.audubon.org/).

Build a Board Game

Have students work in pairs or small groups to prepare a board game based on *Firstborn*. Start with a group discussion about the features of different board games such as cards with questions or directions, dice, spinners, moving pieces, notepads, and so on. Once the games are created, have students exchange games and play them. (NCTE has a board game assignment and rubric at www.readwritethink.org/resources/resource-print.html?id=123.)

A Different Point of View

Firstborn is a first-person narrative from Maggie's point of view. As a class, discuss the topic of POV, including third person omniscient and limited omniscient. Have students each take a section of the book and rewrite it with a third person point of view. Have students share their narratives and talk about the differences in the versions.

The Wolves of Yellowstone

The National Park Service website provides a lot of information about the wolves that were reintroduced into Yellowstone. Have students visit the website and each find an interesting fact to share with the class. The FAQs section has a series of short videos that answer questions about the wolves. Small groups of students could watch different videos and report back to the class on their contents. For a longer video, the class could watch PBS's "In the Valley of the Wolves." (www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/in-the-valley-of-the-wolves-video-full-episode/4678/)

Starstruck

Have students review the contents of chapters using a star-shaped graphic organizer for the five W's. Label each point of the star with Who, What, When, Where, and Why, putting the book title in the middle. Assign each chapter to one or two students and have them analyze the five W's for that chapter, filling out the star with brief entries. Post the stars in chapter order on a bulletin board.

Guide written by Kathleen Odean, a former school librarian and Chair of the 2002 Newbery Award Committee. She gives professional development workshops on books for young people and is the author of Great Books for Girls and Great Books about Things Kids Love.

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