

Content Note: *A Scar like a River* is a work of fiction and touches on certain sensitive themes including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

There are so many things to discuss in exploring a powerful novel like *A Scar like a River*. Begin by identifying some of the key characters including Fallon, her mother and father, her friends Trent, Kaia, and Stella, her Aunt Lune (Claire) and Uncle Geebie, her teacher Mr. C, and her counselor Elise. Talk about some of the major conflicts within the family and within Fallon's friendships and then move to consider the bigger questions and issues. Question prompts like these may be helpful.

1. How do you know whose point of view is presenting this story? Why does the narrator break the "fourth wall" and address the reader directly?
2. How would you describe the protagonist Fallon and each of her friends, Trent, Kaia, and Stella? What draws these characters together as friends?
3. Fallon's friends show up for each other. They spend time laughing together and practice good listening skills. What elements do you find essential in your friendships?
4. Fallon struggles with keeping her three big secrets, sometimes experiencing what she calls "robot-brain" in her inability or reluctance to remember truly painful things. Why are secrets sometimes so difficult or painful to keep? What are the three big secrets that Fallon is struggling to process?
5. There are several moments where characters change their minds and even apologize to others. For example, Fallon changes her opinion of Stella and Aunt Lune (Claire) apologizes to Fallon. What other examples are there? How do those moments affect the story? Why is it so difficult to acknowledge our own wrongdoing and to apologize?
6. The concept of "gaslighting" is crucial in this novel. Discuss this idea and how it is depicted in this story.
7. Fallon and Stella are so upset about the "gaslighting" they see in the *Hello, Dolly!* musical that they choose to protest the musical. What are the elements of an effective protest?
8. The adult characters in this story vary from being caring and sympathetic to damaged or oblivious. Which adult characters are helpful to Fallon and how?

9. Why is this novel entitled *A Scar like a River*? Clearly, Fallon's scar is such an important part of her character, but how does the notion of the river fit in? Graff writes, "A river is never just one thing. Memories are like that, too, sometimes" (p. 385). Discuss the river imagery that occurs throughout the novel. How is a scar like a river?
10. Is healing possible from such devastating trauma? How?

READERS THEATER

When novels include substantial dialogue, strong characterization, and a vivid voice, they lend themselves well to informal performance as readers theater. And since theater is an essential component of this novel, performance is an especially appropriate activity. Plus, readers theater takes very little preparation—no costumes or props, just multiple copies of set pages and if necessary, highlighter pens. In this case, sentences within quotation marks are attributed to each character speaking and the remaining text becomes the part of a Narrator or Narrators. Following are specific sections that work especially well for reading aloud in parts as a readers theater experience. Volunteers can highlight their individual parts or even wear nametags and you can record the session to share with others or to reference in future discussions. These key sections offer opportunities for engaging performances:

- "Baseball" pp. 28-31; 34-36: Narrator(s), Fallon, Trent, Kaia
- "Upside-Down" pp. 124-128: Narrator(s), Fallon, Kaia, Trent and Kaia's brother, Grady
- "Pinky Promise" pp. 176-183: Narrator(s), Fallon, Stella
- "Little Stinkers" pp. 186-191: Narrator(s), Fallon, Kaia, Trent, Stella
- "Amateurs" pp. 213-216: Narrator(s), Fallon, Kaia, Trent
- "At First" pp. 371-373: Narrator(s), Fallon, Kaia, Trent

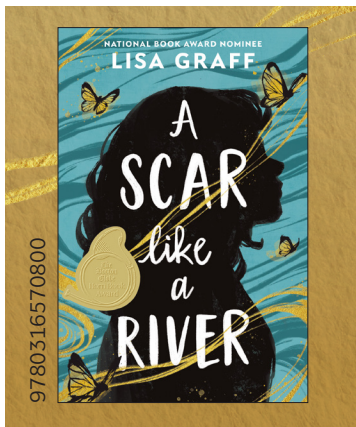


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A SCAR like a RIVER

BY LISA GRAFF

TEACHING TIPS

WRITING

Two of the pivotal elements of this novel are the op-ed pieces written by Fallon (pp. 193-194) and by her Aunt (Lune) Claire (as Sharon Smith, pp. 289-290). Fallon protests the choice of *Hello, Dolly!* in the school newspaper and later she discovers that her aunt had written an anonymous piece about her own sexual abuse years ago. Discuss the concept of the **op-ed** with students. An op-ed (short for “opposite the editorial page”) is a short essay expressing a personal opinion and published in a newspaper, magazine, or online publication. It is usually written by an outside contributor or guest writer and presents a well-researched, persuasive argument on a specific topic, usually limited to approximately 600 words. What is happening in students’ lives that might provide the impetus for composing op eds? Lead a discussion of current issues and then challenge students to try this form of writing—individually, in pairs, or in small groups. Be sure to offer to submit these op-ed pieces and watch for responses.

THE ARTS

The protagonist, Fallon, talks about her hobbies, interests, and career possibilities several times throughout the novel. For example, she writes, “Trent was always telling me I was born to be an actress. Mr. C. had been convinced I should be a lawyer, and Kaia thought I should do makeup. And here was my aunt, saying I could write for a living. I’d always thought I’d end up as a script supervisor, checking for continuity errors in movies—but lately, I hadn’t been quite as worried about continuity as before. Whatever I ended up doing, I figured, at least I knew my options were wide open” (p. 380). She also becomes quite adept at using makeup for face painting and special effects including covering, then highlighting her scar. She watches YouTube tutorial videos to help learn the basics. Explore some of these tutorials and talk about how one can turn hobbies and interest areas into future careers. What kinds of pastimes do students particularly enjoy? How do they develop special expertise? What kinds of career options might emerge from these?

In addition, the musical, *Hello, Dolly!* is a pivotal element in this novel and many aspects of the play’s script, songs, and story are discussed. If time allows, find a version of the film to watch and discuss. It’s widely available to

stream and share on sites like YouTube, Google Play, and various streaming services.

RESEARCH

Physical and mental health are so important in this novel—for the protagonist, Fallon, for her chronically ill mother, and for her extended family and friends. In fact, living with illness, trauma, and disfigurement are at the heart of this story. It may be helpful to work together to research some of these issues for more information, deeper insight, and thoughtful discussion. For example, the author suggests three sites:

[Face Equality International \(FEI\)](#)

[Chronic fatigue syndrome \(CFS\) Dysautonomia International](#)

[RAINN](#)

ADDITIONAL SITES MIGHT INCLUDE:

[National Library of Medicine](#)

[Medline Plus](#)

[Peer Support Group](#)

[NAMI \(National Alliance on Mental Illness\)](#)

[Alliance of Therapy Dogs](#)

[Pet Partners](#)

Examine these websites (and others) and share findings in group discussions.



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