

eleven and holding

Discussion Guide for the Middle Grade Novel



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ABOUT THE BOOK

ELEVEN AND HOLDING

By Mary Penney

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Age Range: 8 - 12 Years

Macy Hollinquest is eleven years old, and don't count on her to change that anytime soon. Her birthday is just days away, but she has no intention of turning twelve without her dad by her side. He'd promised to be there for her big day, and yet he's been gone for months—away after his discharge from the army, doing some kind of top secret, "important work."



So Macy's staying eleven, no matter what—that is, until she meets Ginger, a nice older lady who is searching for her missing dog. Ginger's dog search is the perfect cover for Macy's attempt to locate her dad. But her hunt puts her on a path to a head-on collision with the truth, where she discovers that knowing can sometimes be a heavy burden. And that change, when finally accepted, comes with an unexpected kind of grace.

Mary Penney's earnest, heartfelt story of change, loss, and new beginnings will resonate with young readers on the cusp of new beginnings, and stay in their hearts long after it's done.

"Driven by attractive, colorful characters, this tale is immersive and engaging...Lively, funny, tender without being syrupy, and full of life." —*Kirkus Reviews*

"Compassionate portrayals of grief, courage, and resilience season this compelling coming-of-age story...Macy's candid narrative voice and expressive observations ...bring humor and pathos to Penney's tender, emotionally satisfying story."
—*Publishers Weekly*

"The blend of ordinary and unexpected events is appealing. Middle graders will relate to the theme of resisting change and accepting hard truths...An emotional coming-of-age tale that will resonate with readers who appreciate contemporary, realistic, character-driven novels." —*School Library Journal*

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Chapter 1:

1. Macy begins her story by telling us that she is "...camped out in front of her former life, just watching and waiting to steal it back somehow." What is missing the most? Is it possible to steal back your past? Explain.
2. What was your first impression about the meaning of the title? How did that change after this first chapter? Explain your thinking.
3. What could explain why Ginger was seemingly forgiven so quickly by Chuck, the café's new owner? By contrast, Ginger makes it clear that she would never go inside his café. What does this suggest about their relationship to each other?
4. Why was Macy sorting through the pieces of broken glass? What could have been the importance of the piece she chose to take home?
5. What evidence exists that Twee and Macy have a very close friendship? Describe the characteristics of a best friend. How do they compare to this friendship between Macy and Twee?
6. The chapter ends with a letter to Macy's future middle school teacher, Mr. Jiminez. Will her plan to be flunked out of 7th grade be successful? Why or why not? Does Macy really believe she will be sitting alone every day? Is this a common fear in starting middle school?

Chapter 2:

1. Describe the relationship Macy has with her father, compared to the relationship she has with her mother. Give specific examples for each.
2. Macy's father is away on a new assignment for the military, which Macy believes she can convince him to leave in order to come home for her birthday. Why is this so important to her? What might go wrong with her plan?
3. Twee is trying to get Macy prepared for middle school by buying her makeup, claiming that; "kids in middle school are different from the kids in elementary," and that Macy will get picked on. Do you agree with Twee? Does Macy seem like she is going to be convinced by Twee to start wearing makeup? Is this a good idea?

Chapter 3:

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1. Macy jumps to a very interesting conclusion about Ginger and her dog, Mr. McDougal, when she discovers the pantry is packed with dog food. Do you agree with her summation that the dog has probably not been around for months? Why or why not? What might that reveal about Ginger?
2. Have you ever been “stuck—like when you have a bad scratch on a CD—and it keeps playing over and over” on something, as Macy believes Ginger is on her dog’s disappearance? What helped you to move on?
3. Explain what Twee might be feeling when she learns that Ginger has spent time in Vietnam. Why might she have felt that way? How might this thread of the story develop further?
4. Why do you think Macy chooses to write another letter to Mr. Jiminez, her 7th grade teacher? What was so important that she had to tell him before the first day of school?

Chapter 4:

1. What is Macy’s strategy for preparing herself for the bus trip to Los Robles? How did she learn about it? Do you think it helped her get ready for Wednesday or not? Describe a strategy you have used to prepare yourself for something difficult that you were facing. Did it help?
2. Retell Macy’s first day of kindergarten flashback in your own words. What do you think is the reason this memory is so important to our understanding of her character at this point in the story?
3. Were you surprised by Switch’s appearance on the bus? When does Macy describe herself as “thawing slightly” toward him? Then she immediately challenges him about the balloon he tossed at her father’s float at the parade. He answers that he wasn’t trying to hit him but then stops short of the full explanation. Why do you suppose he didn’t complete the story?
4. On page 62, Macy describes how she was certain her mother’s pregnancy with her baby brother Jack was going to “change everything” for the better. Then she uses a metaphor to describe the actual turn of events. What is the metaphor, and do you think it is an effective image for Macy’s understanding of her world today? Why or why not?
5. Macy describes everyone in her house as a “traitor” in relationship to Chuck. Why? Would you be inclined to agree or disagree with her? Do you think Chuck is interested in taking over her father’s role in her family? How would you feel if you were

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in Macy's shoes? If you were in Chuck's shoes? Has he done anything to merit her impression?

Chapter 5:

1. This entire chapter is devoted to the continued search for Mr. McDougal. Why do you think this sub plot has been included in the larger story? How is the story of the disappearing dog helping us to learn more about the main characters? Be specific.
2. What are the new clues that Macy and Twee have learned from Ginger's neighbor? Do you believe his story? Why or why not?
3. The author, Mary Penney, uses letters to move the story along in subtle ways. How are Macy's letters to her 7th grade teacher helping us to learn more about her? Have you ever used a letter to express something that you might have been reluctant to share in another format?

Chapter 6:

1. When a character is placed in a story as a source of comic relief, they may make us laugh at them, or with them, depending on the author's intent. Describe Officer Marley's role in the book at this time: Is he simply a buffoon, or do you think he may have a more substantial role as the story progresses? Do you think he believes Macy's story about the bracelet?
2. When Macy arrives at the library, we learn that, "...there was no better place in the whole world than a library. Even better than a German chocolate cake right out of the oven, and that was something." Do you have a place that holds that kind of importance to you? Draw or include an image of that space here.
3. Twee is hoping to use the reward money for finding Mr. McDougal toward paying for a trip to Vietnam, where she was born. What are some other ways that we see Twee embracing her Vietnamese heritage? Do you sense that Macy is being supportive of Twee as she tries to integrate this part of herself into her story?
4. Do you agree with Macy that grown-ups are less inclined to help you out on the phone than in person? Why or why not?
5. Macy has a very elaborate set of lies going in order to get out of town to go find her father at the Department of Veteran Affairs. Which of the three "schedules" do you

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think is most likely to go wrong? Why? Or do you think she will be able to pull it off, and make it to and from Los Robles without her mother or Twee knowing what she is really doing?

6. Why was Twee angry at Macy's father after the hike? Would you have had the same reaction?

Chapter 7:

1. What character traits would you use to describe Aunt Liv? How does she remind Macy of her father?

2. Do you have a relative or close family friend who you would describe as someone you "never felt self-conscious with," or who "always made you feel like everything about [you] was perfect"?

3. Describe Macy's sense of humor in her letter to Mr. Jimenez. Is she just trying to be funny, or is something else going on?

Chapter 8:

1. How does Macy feel about her mother at the beginning of this chapter compared to how she feels about her at the end? Can you relate to Macy's point of view?

2. What information do you think Macy's mother is withholding from Macy? Why might her father not be able to come back for her birthday? What would you do if you were in Macy's situation right now? Do you think you would trust what her mother says, or go ahead with the trip anyway?

3. Make a prediction about the next half of the book. Give evidence for your thinking.

Chapter 9:

1. Is Switch as interested as Macy thinks he is in finding Mr. McDougal? Will Macy's attempt to throw him off the trail be effective? Why or why not?

2. Does Macy determine that Ginger is suffering from dementia or other issues associated with old age when she visits her on her way the bus station? What was her biggest surprise?

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3. “Losing someone you love changes everything. It is really quite impossible to absorb. Sometimes you need to stay really mad about it for a while. Just so you can survive the shock of it all.” Who says this in the chapter? Who else could have said it? Can the experience of loss be something that could draw characters together, or apart, or both?
4. Did Switch’s offer to give Macy a ride take you by surprise? Would you have accepted the invitation?
5. Explain the last line in the chapter, “And off we flew, looking exactly like my mother’s worst nightmare.” Have you ever made a choice to do something against your parents’ wishes? What was the outcome?

Chapter 10:

1. When Macy comes to in the gas station, she punches Switch as hard as she can. Twice. Then a few moments later she is sharing an Icee with him and trying to determine if he stole Ginger’s bike. Would you call them friends? Enemies? Neither? Explain.
2. What is the significance of Macy finding Mr. McDougal’s collar in the sidecar? Who does she compare the dog to? Why does she rub the tag on his collar to “seal the deal”? What does that mean?
3. Switch tells Macy he would throw a party in the nursing home that he visits frequently to “deliver” free newspapers to if he gets the reward money for finding Mr. McDougal. What is his reasoning for doing this? What does this reveal to us about his character?
4. Both Twee and Macy also have plans for the money. How do their plans help us learn more about their characters? What would you do with the reward money? Imagine you could give one of them an extra sum of money to support one of the three characters dreams—which one would you chose to contribute to? Why?

Chapter 11:

1. After the narrow escape from the police at the rest stop, Macy finds herself waiting for another bus! When the bus turns out to be a van, things start to take an important turn for the better. Explain the events that lead to her arriving at Los Robles VA Medical Center.
2. What is the purpose of the letter at the end of this chapter? What is Macy asking for now? Does it seem like a reasonable request?

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Chapter 12:

1. When Macy first arrived at the medical center, what did you imagine she would discover there?
2. Nothing seems to deter Macy from her mission of finding her father. Even without an “invisibility cloak,” she manages to find her way up to the ninth floor. Do you think she is just unstoppable by nature, or is there another explanation? Would you describe her as brave? Crazy? Foolish? Explain.
3. The author uses the simile, “My mouth dropped open, like the tailgate of an old Ford truck” to describe Macy’s reaction to Dr. Eckstein calling her by name, and asking if she is there to see her dad. Does the simile work? Why or why not?

Chapter 13:

1. “Boy I knew there were some right answers and wrong answers here, but which was which?” Macy asks when the doctor questions how much she understands about why her father is here. Did Macy understand why her father was there before she arrived? Do you think she does now?
2. When the high school kid in the waiting room mentions the word rehab to describe his father, Macy says it came at her like a “rogue wave.” What does rehab mean? What does the doctor mean when he describes Macy’s father as being in “treatment”?
3. Macy tells us that she was “trying desperately not to understand.” What is it that she is trying not to understand? Is there any other character in the story who seems to be trying not to understand something? Can Macy avoid the truth much longer?
4. Why did Macy run away from her father instead of running to him after all of that effort to get to him? Why was she so upset? What clues does she offer to help us understand?
5. Chuck comes to Macy’s rescue in the same van that Mr. McDougal was taken away in. What would be going through your head if you were Macy? What would you do in her shoes?

Chapter 14:

1. Is Chuck the dognapper? What clue was it that made Macy suspicious initially? What clue was used to force the conversation into the open?

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2. What does Macy learn about Chuck that she did not know before? How does this change her feelings about him?
3. Find one simile or metaphor on page 193, and explain how it helps the reader understand Macy's emotional life at this moment. (Reminder: a simile uses "like" or "as" to make a comparison. Example: "The alarm clock was as loud as a locomotive leaving the station." A metaphor does not. Example: "The alarm clock yelled at me to wake up.")
4. How did Mr. McDougal end up in Ginger's care? Why did Chuck make that decision, and why is it that it almost "killed him" to make that choice?
5. What is it about Ginger's grief, and her inability to accept Mr. McDougal's demise, that Macy relates to? What does that lead Macy to discover about her own sorrow and how it has impacted her understanding of her father?

Chapter 15:

1. What is the scariest thing about county juvenile hall to Macy?
2. Describe the setting in this chapter. Find three to five examples that author Mary Penney uses to help the reader understand where they are. Why do you suppose that she chose this setting to have Macy and her mother reunite?
3. Macy's mother says that she has never been "so scared or so glad" to see anyone in her life. What does she mean by that? Can you connect to this experience in your own life when you held two very big feelings at the same time about the same person?
4. Is Switch and Macy's exchange consistent with your understanding of their relationship with each other in the story? Is it made more complicated by the fact that Macy's mother is a probation officer?
5. What does Switch mean when he asks Macy if he might find a key baked into the cake?
6. Why doesn't Macy answer Switch when he asks her if she found her father?

Chapter 16:

1. Does Macy's explanation to Twee about how her father wasn't really there make sense? What does Macy tell the reader to help us understand her feelings about him?

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Do you think Macy will be able to look up to him again? Why or why not?

2. If you were Twee, would you be able to forgive Macy for lying to you and going on the adventure to find her father without you?
3. Macy draws a connection between Ginger, Chuck, and herself that helps her to see Chuck in a new light. He has gone from “creepy” to what in Macy’s eyes? Use character traits to describe him.
4. What is significant about Macy’s mother’s gesture in the car ride home? What message does it give Macy?
5. Why does Macy tell her 7th grade teacher her secret about not want to play soccer? What would she rather play instead? Have you ever played a sport, or an instrument, or taken up a hobby to please a parent or relative, and then wished you hadn’t?

Chapter 17:

1. What is so important about Macy’s request to come inside the café? What does she discover when she does go inside? What does she learn about herself and her Nana at this moment?
2. When Macy tells Chuck it looks good inside, he tells her, “It does now.” What does he mean?
3. What does Macy mean when she says, “I wish I had been listening to them all along” at the end of the chapter?

Chapter 18:

1. What is going on at Ginger’s house when they arrive, and what does it reveal about her character that is worrisome? Does Ginger seem concerned?
2. What does Macy want to tell Ginger when they sit down to tea? What takes you by surprise during the conversation?
3. “A hundred pictures flashed through my mind like a slide show on turbo speed. And in every one I was the one running around, trying to get everyone together for the perfect family picture. But someone was always missing...” What is Macy realizing here about the “perfect family”? Do you think she was wrong to want to hold onto the

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image?

4. What is the impact of Macy's reveal on Ginger? What does Macy mean when she says she can feel Nana, Philip, and Mr. McDougal "right there with the three of us"?
5. Do Chuck and Macy decide to tell Ginger the truth about Mr. McDougal? Why or why not? Would you make the same choice?

Chapter 19:

1. Macy and her mother are due for a "Big Talk" that Macy has been avoiding, even though she knows it's time. Do you think it is harder for Macy or her mother to be waiting to clear the air? How does the conversation finally get started?
2. Macy senses her mother's hesitation to tell her the truth about the café, and her father. Macy tells her mother she IS ready to hear it, even though she knows it will be hard. What does this reveal about Macy now, compared to earlier in the story? Why is Macy ready now?
3. How did her father's drinking problem interfere with his ability to run the café? Did it turn out that her mother went against Nana's wishes when she sold the café? Why did Macy's father lie to Macy about that, according to her mother?
4. Of everything that Macy learns about her father, her mother, and her nana in the story, what do you think is the most helpful? What do you think is going to be the hardest for Macy to make sense of? Why?

Chapter 20:

1. Explain the larger significance of the photograph Chuck gave Macy. How did she react? Why did it mean so much to her?
2. Consider the importance of the title, "eleven and holding," in the context of this chapter and Macy's surprise party.
3. Is it Macy who says "Well, almost!" at the end of the chapter, or the author? Do you think there is room for Macy's story to continue? Write down three events in the sequel to the story that you would like to see unfold in Macy's twelfth year. Pick one of the events to outline for a chapter. What problem will you include that Macy needs to figure out?

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4. Look back at the first letter Macy wrote to Mr. Jiminez. Compared to this one, what is one major evolution Macy's character has gone through during the course of the summer that is captured in the letters themselves?

5. Why doesn't the reader get to hear the conversation between Macy and her father at the end of the story? Write down a few lines of dialogue that you would LIKE to hear if you were Macy.

Additional End of Book Questions:

1. Did this book give you any new ideas about yourself? Why?

2. Which character has traits that remind you most of you? Why?

3. Describe a different way that you might have solved a problem that came up in the book.

4. What purpose do the letters serve in the structure of the story itself? How does Mary Penney use this device to help us understand Macy in ways the story cannot? Have you ever written a letter to share something about yourself that was too difficult to do in person?

5. How did the title suit the book, or not suit it?

END OF BOOK PROJECT IDEAS

1. Write a series of three to five letters to someone you have not met, telling them about you as a learner, a friend, an artist, an athlete, a daughter or a son, and a brother or a sister. Each letter should include a story with two to three significant details that reveals a moment where you learned about one of your character traits. Your letter could be to a future teacher, a future sibling, a coach, a friend you hope to meet. Each letter must be two to three paragraphs long, follow proper informal letter form, and include a drawing or photograph to illustrate part of the letter.

2. By interviewing members of your family, find a country or territory outside of this state that your family comes from at some point in their ancestry that you have never been to. Plan a trip there, including a budget. How much would airfare be? Where would you stay? What are three things you know you would want to do when you are there? Why? What are some things you could do before your journey to help you prepare? Are there foods you could eat? A language you would need to learn? Keep a travel journal that details your planning, your budget, your hopes and your discoveries.

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3. Write a series of poems about a year in your life, that was a significant one for you. Make sure to include at least two similes or metaphors in each poem. Each poem should correspond to one moment on the plot map of that year; setting, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide was produced by Curious City DPW and written by educator Catherine Maryse Anderson. Find more guides like this at CuriousCityDPW.com.

Catherine Maryse Anderson has an extensive 15-year background as a public school literacy and humanities teacher in Portland, Maine. She spent two years as a literacy coach for Portland Public Schools and lead statewide symposiums on building educator capacity for cross-cultural competency in the classroom from early childcare through college. She was a runner up for the *Teaching Tolerance* Educator of the Year and has served on the selection committee of Raising Readers for nine years. Catherine has been involved in ongoing performing arts projects for twenty years and is a published poet and essayist.