

# THE SERPENT KING

JEFF  
ZENTNER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

# ABOUT THE SERPENT KING

## THE ONLY PLACE THEY FIT WAS TOGETHER. . . .

Dill isn't the most popular kid at his rural Tennessee high school. After his father fell from grace in a public scandal that reverberated throughout their small town, Dill became a target. Fortunately, his two fellow misfits and best friends, Travis and Lydia, have his back. But as they begin their senior year, Dill feels the coils of his future tightening around him. His only escapes are music and his secret feelings for Lydia—neither of which he is brave enough to share. Graduation feels more like an ending to Dill than a beginning. But even before then, he must cope with another ending—one that will rock his life to the core.



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Photograph © Steve Cross

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeff Zentner is a singer-songwriter and guitarist who has recorded with Iggy Pop, Nick Cave, and Debbie Harry. In addition to writing and recording his own music, Zentner works with young musicians at Tennessee Teen Rock Camp, which inspired him to write a novel for young adults. He lives in Nashville with his wife and son. Committed to making creativity a part of his everyday life, Zentner wrote both his debut novel, *The Serpent King*, and his follow-up book, *Goodbye Days*, on his iPhone while taking the bus to and from work. You can follow Zentner on Facebook, on Instagram, and on Twitter at @jeffzentner.

## PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

### **Bullying**

Write about a time when you or one of your friends has been hurt by bullying. Are there peers or friends in your circle who would stand up to the bully? Have you ever reacted negatively and become the bully instead of the one being bullied? Who are the adults in your life you can trust to help? How do you think schools should address the problem of bullying?

### **Friendship**

What is the difference between a friend and an acquaintance? What are some attributes of a good friend? How should friends treat each other? What qualities do you look for in a friend? How do friendships change as you get ready to graduate from high school?

### **My Town**

On a piece of paper, create a two-column chart. Label the first column Positive Attributes; label the second column Negative Attributes. Think about the city or town where you live. List all the positive attributes about your city or town in the first column. Then list all the negative attributes in the second column. Share your chart with another person in class. Together with a classmate, brainstorm ways to improve the negative attributes.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Dread.** “There were things Dillard Wayne Early Jr. dreaded more than the start of school. . . . Thinking about the future was one of them.” (p. 1)
  - Why does Dill dread his future beyond high school?
  - What circumstances cause these concerns?
- **Doing Things You Don’t Want to Do.** At the beginning of the story, Dill’s mom wants him to visit his father in prison. She says, “I don’t ask for much, Dillard. It would make me happy. And it would make him happy.” (p. 3)
  - Have your parents or guardians ever asked you to do something that you knew would be uncomfortable?
  - What did they want you to do?
  - How did they respond when you told them how you felt?
  - What was the outcome? Was it what you expected?
- **Judgment.** When Lydia, Dill, and Travis go to Nashville to do some shopping, Dill reflects, “I still caught hell for stuff, but I’m sure that would’ve happened no matter what I wore.” Lydia responds, “It would. Because we go to school with people who wouldn’t recognize great style.” (p. 8)
  - Are appearances important to your school culture?
  - Do teens judge a person by what he or she wears? Why or why not?
  - How can teenagers practice the adage “Don’t judge a book by its cover”?
- **The Internet.** Throughout the story, we learn of Lydia’s social media prowess, Travis’s involvement with online discussions, and Dill’s popular videos on YouTube. Lydia laughs, “Let’s just say that being Internet famous carries little cachet among my classmates.’ ‘It kind of carries negative cachet,’ Dill said.” (p. 17)
  - How has social media and the use of the Internet impacted these friends’ lives?
  - Do you think the effect is positive or negative?
  - How has social media impacted your life?
- **Poverty.** During the story, readers discover how poor Dill’s family is. “She mopped up the last bit of her casserole with a heel of dry bread. . . . He . . . pulled out a sheet of plastic wrap that they used, washed, and reused.” (p. 45)
  - How do you define poor?
  - Poverty affects many people, both in the United States and around the world. Research what circumstances lead to poverty and how you can help.
- **Work vs. Education.** Dill learns that his mother would rather he get a full-time job at the grocery store than graduate from high school. “You can read. Write. Add. Subtract. You got a line to a good job. What do you need a piece of paper for? I care that you learn your scripture, that’s all.” (p. 46)
  - Is graduating from high school important?
  - What about graduating from college?
  - If one of your parents asked you to do something similar, how would you react?
- **Loneliness.** “Sometimes music worked on the loneliness. Other times, when he felt as if he were sitting at the bottom of a dry well, looking up at the sky, it didn’t work at all. Today marked the beginning of the end for him.” (p. 47)
  - What does this mean?
  - How is Dill feeling?
  - Why is he feeling like this?
  - If you were Lydia or Travis, how could you help Dill?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

- **Opposites Attract.** As their relationship grows, Lydia and Dill find they have much in common but also many differences. Think about their lives at school, their home lives, and their relationships with their parents.
  - How are Lydia and Dill's family relationships similar?
  - How are they different?
  - How might the saying "Opposites attract" apply to Lydia and Dill's relationship?
- **Life Choices.** Lydia's dad asks her, "Do you really think living here hasn't had a big hand in who you've turned out to be? Do you think you'd have had the same drive to create *Dollywould* if we'd laid the world out for you at your doorstep?" (pp. 115–116)
  - How would you answer these questions?
  - Do you have choices in life, or is your future already decided? Explain.
- **Genuine Friends.** "Listen, sweetie, these are real friends you have. *Genuine* friends." (p. 117)
  - What are some of the ways that Travis, Lydia, and Dill show genuine friendship?
  - What brings these three teens together? Is it the similarities, the differences, or both?
  - Are you and your genuine friends more similar or different? Why?
  - What are some ways you and your friends show genuine friendship?
- **Arguments.** Several points in the story lead to arguments between Dill and Lydia. For example: "'Y'all, please stop fighting,' Travis said. 'It's not worth it.' Dill and Lydia both glared at Travis." (p. 158)
  - How does the author develop the characters through these scenes?
  - Have you and a good friend ever had an argument? If so, how did you resolve it?
- **Fantasy and Reality.** "Raynar Northbrook sat at his table, holding the latest missive from *Lady Amelia*. . . . He pored over her flowery script. . . . His heart sang every time he heard news of her." (p. 163)
  - How does Travis's favorite fantasy series parallel his relationship with his online friend, Amelia?
  - Why did Jeff Zentner incorporate excerpts from the fantasy series into the story line?
- **Family Myth.** Throughout the story, we learn about Dill's family history and that his grandfather was known as the Serpent King. (pp. 68–69)
  - Why did Jeff Zentner choose *The Serpent King* as the title?
  - If you could select another title for this book, what would it be? Explain.
- **The Truth.** During a confrontation between Dill and his mother, Dill says, "So lie? I took an oath to tell the truth. I swore on *the Bible* to tell the truth. . . . I didn't testify against [Dad]. I testified for myself." (p. 202)
  - What would you do if you were in Dill's shoes?
  - Have you or one of your friends had to lie for someone?
  - If so, was it beneficial or harmful to lie in this circumstance? Why?
- **Hope.** When Travis meets the author of his favorite series: "Travis glowed. Something began to grow inside of him. Something that might be able to grow through the rocks and dirt that his father had piled on him." (pp. 221–222)
  - In your opinion, what was growing inside Travis?
  - If you were Travis's friend, how could you help him?
  - How would you feel if you had a parent like Travis's dad?
  - How could you overcome this situation?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

- **Friends Are Family.** “Travis looked him in the eye, that steely resolve in his voice. ‘I mean it, Dill. I really mean it. We need to take care of each other from now on. We need to be each other’s family because ours are so messed up. We need to make better lives for ourselves. We gotta start doing stuff we’re afraid to do.’” (p. 233)
    - If you were Dill, how would you respond?
    - When did Travis realize the importance of his relationship with Dill?
    - If you and a friend were in similar circumstances, how would you help one another?
  - **Condolences.** At Travis’s funeral, Lydia saw an “elaborate and beautiful flower arrangement” with a card that read: “*Rest, O Knight, proud in victory, proud in death. Let your name evermore be a light to those who loved you. Let white flowers grow upon this place that you rest. Yours was a life well lived, and now you dine in the halls of the Elders at their eternal feast.*” (p. 261)
    - Explain the note.
    - Why is the card so meaningful and important?
    - If you wrote a card, what would you say about Travis?
  - **Honesty in Grief.** On Lydia’s *Dollywould* blog, she writes, “This is both a eulogy and a confession. . . . I am a fraud. I pretend to be all of the things Travis was: comfortable in my own skin. Brave. . . . I thought it would make me feel less cool if you knew that he was my friend, so I kept him a secret. But no more. I would rather live authentically and take whatever consequences may come of it than live a lie.” (pp. 272–273)
    - What do you think of Lydia’s post?
    - Why is Lydia finally honest and open with her fans?
    - What would you write to Lydia in response?
  - **Depression.** “Dill appeared even more wan and pale than usual under the blackening sky. Something about him seemed ethereal. As if he were disappearing . . . Declining. Diminishing. Eroding.” (p. 277) “But he wasn’t okay. Despite everything, the darkness encroached. Day by day, the poison spread, strangling him.” (p. 292)
    - As Dill falls into this dark spiral of depression, how do those around him try to help?
    - What are some of the emotions that Dill was feeling?
    - If you were one of Dill’s close friends, what would you do?
  - **Finding Light in Darkness.** “Now his life had the sun and the soil to keep growing.” (p. 319) “*And if you’re going to live, you might as well do painful, brave, and beautiful things.*” (p. 327) “He walked into the bright morning, feeling lighter and freer than he had ever felt.” (p. 369)
    - What was the turning point in Dill’s downward spiral?
    - Who played a key role in showing Dill how to be happy in life?
    - What events allowed him to be free?
- 

# ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

## Inspirational Messages

At the Column, Lydia writes inspirational messages.

- Which quotes inspire you the most?
- Think about the meaning of your chosen quote. Create a poster to convey that quote's message.

## Escapism Through Books

Mr. Burson, the owner of Riverbank Books, asks, "To what mysterious and fantastical lands may I offer you passage today?" (p. 124)

- What genre or book have you read that allows you to escape?
- Design a book cover that encapsulates escapism.
- Share your book cover with your classmates.

## Music

Music is often used to connect people to each other. In *The Serpent King*, Dill shares some of his songs with Lydia.

- Create an original playlist that is representative of one of the characters' experiences in *The Serpent King*.
- Offer an explanation for the selection of each song.

## PRAISE

**2017 William C. Morris Award Winner**  
**A *New York Times* Notable Book**  
**An Amazon Best Book of the Year**  
**A *Kirkus Reviews* Best Book of the Year**  
**A *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of the Year**

**"Move over, John Green; Zentner is coming for you."**

—The New York Public Library

★ "Zentner writes with understanding and grace—a new voice to savor."

—*Kirkus Reviews*, Starred

★ "[T]his sepia-toned portrait of small-town life serves as a moving testament to love, loyalty, faith, and reaching through the darkness to find light and hope."

—*Publishers Weekly*, Starred

★ "[An] extraordinary debut."

—*Shelf Awareness*, Starred

★ "Convey[s] distinct flavor for each deeply personal and introspective storyline, so each character emerges as an authentic individual, flawed yet lovable, and readers will find themselves drawn by the heartstrings into their complex lives."

—*The Bulletin*, Starred

"Thorough characterization and artful prose allow readers to intimately experience the highs and lows of these three friends. . . .

**Recommended for fans of John Green and Rainbow Rowell."**

—*School Library Journal*

This guide was created by Gregory Lum, Library Director at Jesuit High School in Portland, Oregon.