

"GORGEOUS, HEARTBREAKING, AND ULTIMATELY LIFE-AFFIRMING."
-NICOLA YOON, #1 NEW YORK TIMES bestselling author of EVERYTHING, EVERYTHING

Goodbye Days

a novel

Jeff Zentner

Author of *THE SERPENT KING*



DISCUSSION GUIDE

ABOUT GOODBYE DAYS

What if you could spend one last day with someone you lost?

Carver Briggs never thought a simple text would cause a fatal crash, killing his three best friends, Mars, Eli, and Blake. But now Carver can't stop blaming himself for the accident, and, to make matters even worse, a powerful judge is pressuring the district attorney to open up a criminal investigation.

Luckily, Carver has some unexpected allies: Eli's girlfriend, the only person to stand by him at school; Dr. Mendez, his new therapist; and Blake's grandmother, who asks Carver to spend a "goodbye day" with her to share their memories and say a proper farewell.

Soon the other families are asking for their own goodbye day with Carver, but he's unsure of their motives. Will they all be able to make peace with their losses, or will these goodbye days bring Carver one step closer to a complete breakdown, or—even worse—prison?



Grades 9 and up

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeff Zentner is the acclaimed author of *The Serpent King*. In addition to writing, he is a singer-songwriter and guitarist who has recorded with Iggy Pop, Nick Cave, and Debbie Harry. *Goodbye Days* is his love letter to the city of Nashville, the city his family calls home, and the talented people who make the city so special. He lives there with his wife and son. You can follow him on Facebook, on Instagram, and on Twitter at @jeffzentner.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

What Is Loss?

Have you experienced the death of a close friend or relative? What are some of the emotions that you felt after your loss? What memories do you have of your loved one? Write about this loved one and your experience.

Multiple Perspectives

From the time you woke up yesterday to the time you went to bed last night, recollect all the events of your day. Do you remember exactly what happened? How might these events look different from another person's point of view? Who are the people with whom you interacted? What might those interactions look like from their perspective?

The Arts

When someone says "the arts," what do you think of? Brainstorm all the activities that fall in this category. Compare your list with a classmate's.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **On Friendship.** Carver, Blake, Eli, and Mars were great friends. Zentner writes that the "Sauce Crew was so tight. We were our own universe." (p. 22)
 - What brought them together?
 - Have you built a close set of friends? How?
- **On Grief.** "It's several seconds before I can speak; I'm swallowing the sobs trying to claw their way out of my throat. 'I don't think I'll ever laugh again.'" (p. 30)
 - What causes Carver to say this?
 - Have you ever had similar feelings? Why?
- **On Actions and Words.** "I wonder if the actions we take and the words we speak are like throwing pebbles into a pond; they send ripples that extend farther out from the center until finally they break on the bank or disappear." (p. 31)
 - What does Carver mean by this statement?
 - How do your actions and words extend beyond individual conversations?
- **On Guilt.** Carver says, "I awake with a wild gasp, my pulse galloping. My sheets are drenched with sweat, my face tight with the salt of dream tears. . . . I guess guilt doesn't sleep. It only eats." (p. 45) He later continues, "As [my dreams] have done so many times, they evaporate into the small hours' dark, leaving me alone with my wild grief. With my searing guilt." (p. 165)
 - What causes sleepless nights for Carver?
 - Besides guilt, what other feelings would cause Carver to have difficulty sleeping?
 - Have you or a close friend had sleepless nights due to a specific event? Describe this. How did you deal with your overwhelming emotions?
- **On Hope.** "Something lifts from my chest as we talk. As if I were lying under a pile of stones, and someone is removing them one by one." (pp. 58–59)
 - What causes this relief for Carver?
 - Does talking with someone help Carver? If so, how? Why do you think talking with someone helps in a situation like this?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (continued)

- **On Puzzle Pieces.** Nana Betsy, Blake's grandmother, says, "Funny how people move through this world leaving little pieces of their story with the people they meet, for them to carry. Makes you wonder what'd happen if all those people put their puzzle pieces together." (p. 67)
 - What do you think would happen if people could put the puzzle pieces together?
 - Would this have a positive or negative effect?
- **On Trust.** Carver's sister, Georgia, offers some advice: "Then you know you need to trust other people and open up. . . . You can't be a dumb cowboy about this." (p. 121)
 - Who should Carver trust and open up to?
 - In your life, who do you trust with your thoughts and feelings?
 - How did you develop trust with this person?
- **On Loss.** Jesmyn comments, "Grief is weird. It seems to come in these waves out of nowhere. One minute I'm standing in the ocean, fine. The next minute I'm drowning. . . . If you didn't feel their loss, what kind of person would you be?" (p. 130)
 - How would you respond to Jesmyn's question if you lost your best friends?
 - What is Carver's response?
- **On Confrontation.** Adair, Eli's twin sister, confronts Carver by saying, "I hope you go to jail. I really do. I hope you die there." (p. 152)
 - Why would Adair say this to Carver?
 - If you were Adair, how would you treat Carver?
- **On What-ifs.** During the story, Carver says, "I start the what-ifs. The do-overs. The replays." (p. 169)
 - Why would Carver start thinking about this?
 - Is it healthy?
 - What are some alternatives to playing the what-if game?
- **On Flashbacks.** Author Jeff Zentner uses flashbacks in his writing.
 - Why do you think Zentner uses this technique?
 - What do you, as a reader, get from the flashbacks?
 - If you were going to write this story, what other writing styles could you use to convey the same narrative?
- **On Dignity and Laughter.** Blake says to Carver, "Dignity is overrated. People can live without it. . . . But people can't live without laughter. I'll gladly trade dignity for laughter, because dignity is cheap and laughter is worth everything." (p. 187)
 - What does Blake mean by this statement?
 - Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
 - Describe a situation where the adage "Laughter is the best medicine" is true.
- **On Coming Out.** Blake comes out to Carver: "I think . . . it's guys I like." (p. 199)
 - How does Carver respond?
 - If you had a good friend who told you they were gay, what would you say?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (continued)

- **On Relaying Bad News.** When Nana Betsy can't tell Blake's mom about his death, Carver takes the phone. "I raise the phone to my ear. 'Hello, Mitzi?' I swallow hard. My legs start bouncing. My heart is laboring." (p. 221)
 - What are some of the emotions that Carver is feeling as he tells Blake's mom about her son's death?
 - Have you ever had to tell someone something very emotional? How did you handle it?
- **On Nostalgia.** "[Jesmyn and I] take a collective deep breath and walk up the front steps. It's the first time I've been to Eli's house since before the Accident. The keen ache of nostalgia entwines my heart." (p. 259)
 - Why is Carver feeling nostalgic?
 - In your opinion, what is going through Carver's mind and heart?
- **On People You Love.** Carver thinks about the people who love him. "Mostly you hold them in your heart because they save you, in a million quiet and perfect ways, from being alone." (p. 277)
 - Who does Carver hold close to his heart?
 - Who do you hold close to your heart? Why?
- **On Law and Order.** While the police officers execute the search warrant, Carver shares, "Watching them, I feel like they're picking through my innards, tugging meat from bone. Vultures on a carcass. Their hunger: to ruin my life even more than it's already ruined." (p. 294)
 - Why would Carver feel this way?
 - Have you or a close friend ever had your personal space invaded? If so, how did it feel?
- **On Happiness.** Carver shares with his sister, Georgia, "I want to be happy again before I die. That's all I want." (p. 321)
 - What will it take for Carver to be happy again?
 - If you were Carver's friend, what would you say or do to help him?
- **On Separate Hearts.** "You have a love heart, separate from your grieving heart, or your guilt heart, or your fear heart. All can be individually broken in their own way." (p. 322)
 - What other types of hearts can one have?
 - Can one heart be broken while the others are fine? Explain.
- **On Objects That Make Up the Soul.** "I open the final drawer. It brims with Mars's drawings. I knew I'd encounter this. . . . And still I'm not ready to see it. If Mars's clothes were his body, now I'm handling his soul." (p. 360)
 - What does Carver mean when he says that Mars's drawings are his soul?
 - How would you react if you were in Carver's position?
 - Do you have something special that would represent your soul? If so, explain.
- **On Goodbye Days.** Carver has three goodbye days: one with Blake's grandmother, one with Eli's parents, and one with Mars's father.
 - How are the goodbye days similar?
 - How are they different?
 - Which one has the most impact on Carver? Why?
 - Which goodbye day had the most impact on you as a reader? Explain.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

Anxiety

On the first day of school, Carver experiences a panic attack. “An invisible anaconda winds around my chest, squeezing, crushing. My heart strains against the pressure. My throat clenches. A sheen of sweat forms on my forehead like an ice slick on a bridge. My mouth is parched.” (p. 112)

- Research panic disorders, including their history, symptoms, and treatment.
- Create a tri-fold brochure to share your findings. Include a list of resources.

Falling in Love

“I have fallen in love with her quietly. . . . It crept into my heart like vines overgrowing a stone wall. It caught me like a river rising and swelling.” (p. 283)

- Write a simile about falling in love.
- Using colored pencils or markers, create a visual image of the simile.
- In nice lettering, incorporate your simile into your visual image.

Musical Advice

After attending the concert, Dearly offers some advice to Jesmyn and Carver: “Stick with the people you love and who love you. Stick with the music.” (p. 314)

- Create a playlist for someone you love, such as your parents, a sibling, or a close friend. Explain why you selected each song.

PRAISE

★ “Zentner does an excellent job creating **empathetic characters**, especially his protagonist Carver, a budding writer whose first-person account of his plight is artful evidence of his talent.” —*Booklist*, Starred

★ “Racial tensions, spoiled reputations, and broken homes all play roles in an often **raw meditation on grief** and the futility of entertaining what-ifs when faced with awful, irreversible events.” —*Publishers Weekly*, Starred

“[A] novel **full of wisdom.**” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“[The] kind of **intelligent, intense, and life-affirming tale** that will resonate with teens seeking depth and honesty.”

—*School Library Journal*

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

