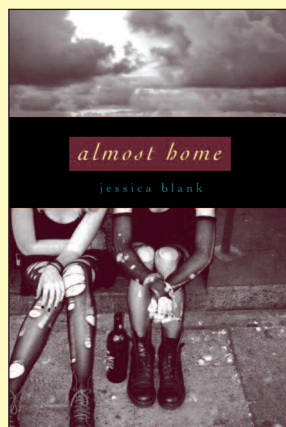


This guide was created by Tracie Vaughn Zimmer, a reading specialist and children's author. Visit her Web site at www.tracievaughnzimmer.com to find hundreds of other guides to children's and young adult literature.



Almost Home

Hardcover \$15.99

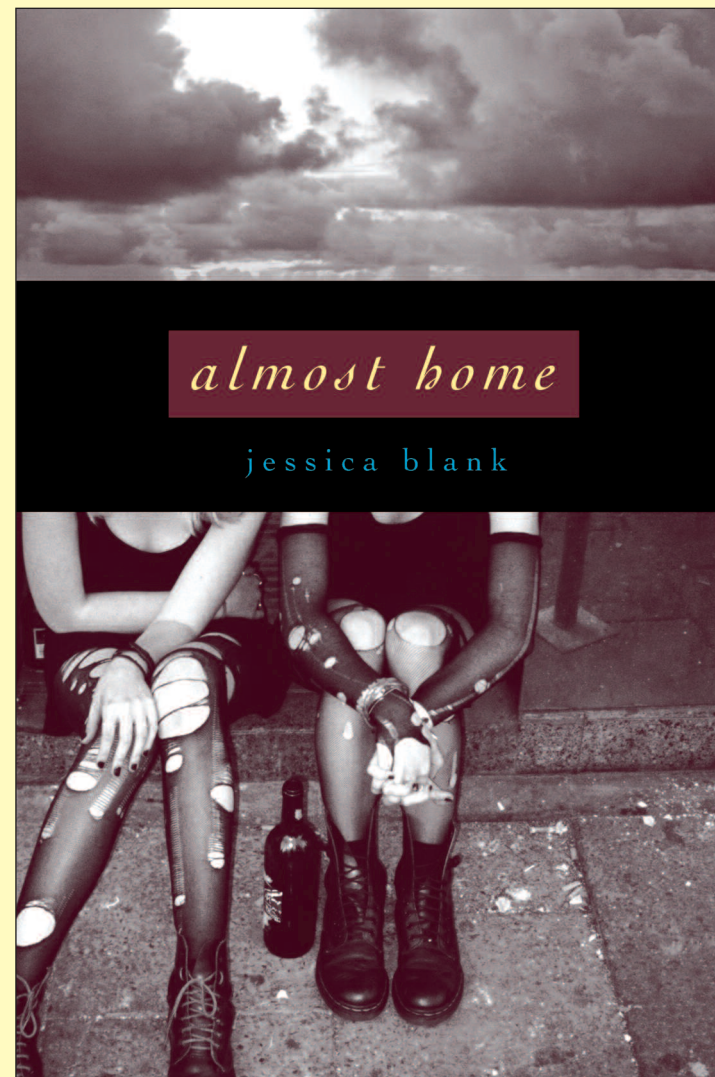
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DISCUSSION GUIDE

HYPERION

About the Book

There's *Eeyore*, just twelve years old when she runs away from her privileged home, harboring a secret she's too ashamed to tell anyone. *Rusty* winds up alone and broke when his older boyfriend ditches him in Hollywood. *Squid* has survived a meth-addicted mom and too many foster homes to count—now he's determined to create his own “sidewalk family” out on the streets. There's *Scabius*, a rough delusional punk from Utah, and *Critter*, a heroin dealer with movie-star looks and a vulnerable heart. *Laura*, smart and restless, has run to L.A. looking for something bigger than the tiny town she comes from.

And then there's *Tracy*, the charismatic, damaged thread that ties them all together, irrevocably changing each person's life she touches.

With rare candor and searing prose, debut young-adult author Jessica Blank introduces us to seven unforgettable teens who form their own dysfunctional family, complete with love and belonging, abuse and betrayal.

About the Guide

This guide includes discussion questions and projects intended to extend the use of the novel into classrooms, book clubs, and literature circles. It should promote discussion of the novel's themes, including homelessness, running away, drug addiction, friendship, family, sex, betrayal, violence, and abuse.

Discussion Questions

- 1 Describe what is happening to Eeyore at home. Why does she feel she can't tell anyone? At school, how are her problems magnified? What unexpected person comes to her rescue at school? Does she really rescue Eeyore, or lead her into an even more dangerous position? Support your answer.
- 2 Explain how Rusty ends up on the streets. Why does he continue to call Jim? Do you think Jim will ever come to Rusty's rescue? Why or why not? Do you think he abandoned him on purpose? Why?
- 3 What must Rusty do to survive on the streets? Why does he feel like he's cheating on his new friend, Squid, instead of on his actual boyfriend, when he's making money? What happens between Squid and Rusty? Why can't Rusty define himself outside of his relationships?
- 4 What is Squid's story? How did he end up on the streets? Why does he sometimes lash out at others—particularly Eeyore—after she's told him why she left home? Squid says, “Still you do the same shit to everybody else that they have done to you.” (page 99) Do you agree with him? Is it possible to rise above the way you have been treated? How?
- 5 When Squid escorts Eeyore back to her house Linda (Eeyore's stepmom) is confronted with the truth for the first time. What happens? Do you think it would've been any different had Eeyore's dad been at home instead? Why or why not?
- 6 Who is Scabius? How does he become a part of the ring? Why does Eeyore make a move on him? What happens between them? How does this change the dynamic of the group more than other events? Scabius says, “People are loyal when they have to be, when they're the same as each other and there's no escape. When there's a hatch, they'll always take it.” (page 126) Do you agree with his assessment or not? Why? How does he get Eeyore to leave?

- 7 How does Scabius try to get control over Tracy? Does it work? What is his ultimate goal? Do you think this is the first time Tracy has faced this kind of treatment? Why or why not? What dangers do street kids face each day?
- 8 Critter falls in love with Tracy and yet is able to inflict great violence upon her. Is this possible? Can people be in love and hurt each other both physically and emotionally? Is that true love? Do you think Tracy ever really loved Critter or was she using him for his junk?
- 9 Describe Laura. What is she trying to prove by being out on the street? She says, “I’d burned through every book in my tiny school library, made straight A’s since seventh grade and no one noticed: not my mom, not my teachers even. Past twelve, if you were a girl, all anyone cared about was pretty.” (page 178) Is this an accurate statement? Predict what you think will happen to Laura in five and ten years. How does she try to save Tracy?
- 10 How does Tracy’s story weave through all the other runaways’ stories? Tracy is being led inside the pornography industry to feed her drug habit. Is this typical of teenagers? What ends up happening to most of them? Who does Tracy run into? Are they able to escape? In the end, what do you think happens to each of the characters? Why?



Projects

Fill out the following graphic organizer as you read the novel. Use it as a springboard for discussion or to study for quizzes:

Use page #'s	Description Physical and emotional	In their own words Find a quote that best represents them	Backstory How they ended up on the street	In the end. . .
Eeyore				
Tracy				
Rusty				
Squid				
Scabius				
Critter				

Language Arts

Write the story of another runaway who ends up connecting with Critter’s street family. Be sure your character has an original voice and story.

Music

Create a playlist for the movie sound track of the novel. In a brief journal, explain why you made these selections.

Art

Create a piece of art from one of the characters’ viewpoints. Use color, shape, and media to express their story in a unique way. Then, write a brief artist’s statement about your choices.

Service Learning

Organize a fund-raiser for one of the organizations listed in the back of the novel (or a local provider of services to homeless or runaway youth). When teams, troops, or clubs work together, a great deal of money can be raised; but even a single person can make a difference. You can also volunteer at your local provider and get involved.

About the Author

Jessica Blank, an actor and writer, has appeared in several films, including *The Namesake*, *On the Road with Judas*, and *Undermind*; and on TV in *Law and Order: Criminal Intent*, *The Bronx Is Burning*, and *Rescue Me*, among others. She is coauthor (with her husband Erik Jensen) of the award-winning play *The Exonerated*, which was based on interviews they conducted with more than forty exonerated death-row inmates across America, and of *Living Justice*, a book about the making of *The Exonerated*. This is her first novel for young adults. She lives in Brooklyn with her husband and their dogs, Zooey and Yoda.



Kristin Hoebermann

Author Interview

1 How did your background in playwriting inform your work on this novel?

I'm a playwright and an actor, so I always think in terms of character first. When I first started writing fiction, my entry points were things I've learned in the theater: motivation, psychology, and the notion that action always emerges from character. (And, conversely, that a character is the sum total of her actions). It's why I write in the first person; I find my characters by getting inside their heads and hearts, much as I would while acting in a play or writing dialogue.

Also—and I think this has to do with theater too—I've always resisted that classic writing-class maxim to “write what you know.” I'd much rather find something I *don't* know and learn it inside out, let it mingle with my own life, and then write *that*. I want to engage with the world around me—the whole world, not just the parts that are familiar or comfortable. That desire to reach across difference is grounded in my theater training: a character in a play will always be a different being from the actor playing

that character, so you have to find the points of connection; you have to learn deeply and thoroughly about the parts that are different; and ultimately, you have to work to integrate the two.

2 What type of research did you do to bring this story to life?

In the late '90s, I took a year off from college to work at a community restaurant in Minneapolis. Whatever food we didn't sell on a given day, we gave away at night, so I got to know the homeless community in the neighborhood. There was a group of street kids that often came in, and while I never got to really know them personally, I knew their faces and their names and spent time around them every evening. Those kids stuck with me. Years later, I was in Hollywood directing a play with my husband at a theater near Vine and Santa Monica. Somehow that place came together with those kids, and that alchemy produced the beginnings of this book.

The kids in the book are fictional, though—they're not the actual kids I knew in Minneapolis; they needed their own stories and realities and lives. So I had to do more research. As I was writing, I dug up whatever I could find on street kids in America—from documentaries to photos to academic papers and information on the Internet. Surprisingly, there's not as much out there as you'd expect: street kids are, tragically, pretty invisible in our society. Discovering that fact only re-upped my commitment to write this book and help get some of these stories into public view.

3 What is your next project?

I'm juggling a lot! Between acting jobs in film and TV, I'm finishing another YA novel set in 1987 on a yoga ashram. I have a new play called *Liberty City*, which I cowrote with a wonderful actress and writer named April Thompson; I'm directing that in NYC sometime in 2008. I just started an Off-Broadway theater company, The Fire Dept, with two other women. And my amazing actor-writer husband, Erik Jensen, and I are busy adapting *Almost Home* into a screenplay.