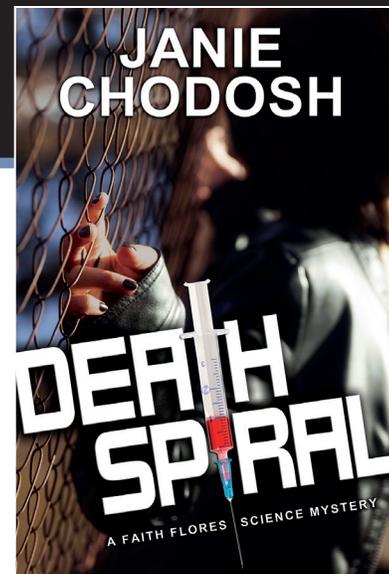


DISCUSSION GUIDE

Sixteen-year-old Faith Flores is a work in progress. She wants to go to college and study science, but she's not exactly college material. Thanks to her junkie mom, Faith has never known a stable life. But when her mom drops dead, Faith is the only one who cries. The cops say it was an overdose, but Faith doesn't buy it.

Before long she's skipping school, lying to her aunt, and blowing off her friends in a search for the truth that leads Faith from the drug houses and methadone clinics of North Philly to the million-dollar science labs of the pharmaceutical industry. But some people don't want a nosy teenager meddling in their business, and if Faith isn't careful, she might just end up dead.



WHOLE BOOK DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ At the start of the book, Faith states, “The only good junkie is a dead junkie. They’re at the bottom of everything. Down there with hookers and drunks. When a junkie dies, no one investigates. They call it an overdose and close the book.” (Page 1) Do you agree with this thinking? Why or why not? After reading the book, why might Faith have believed this?
- ▶ When speaking to the class, Mrs. Lopez says, “Today we start our end-of-term projects with a unit on genetic ethics... As you know, scientists are studying and learning about new genes all the time. This is the frontier; a scientific revolution. Who knows what will happen by the time you’re my age. Designer babies? Gene therapy to change your height? Your eye color? What if I could tell you your complete genetic makeup?” (Page 5) Would you want to know? Why or why not?
 - ▶ Science Extension (based off the question above):
 - Explain what a dominant and recessive trait is.
 - Research the genetics of Huntington’s disease.
 - Research the genetics of addiction.
- ▶ After Faith’s mom dies, many people are skeptical that her death is anything but a heroin overdose. How do people’s views about this change throughout the novel? What specific events occur to bring about this change?
- ▶ Faith will do whatever it takes to find out what really caused her mom’s death, even if it puts her in danger. Describe specific examples where we see Faith doing this.

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- ▶ Examine Faith's early impressions of Jesse. Describe them and support with details. Did her early impressions hold true? Explain why or why not with specific examples from the novel.
- ▶ While in the methadone clinic, Faith wonders about addiction, "...and I think maybe the real issue isn't where I come from, but where I'm going. Is it enough to try really hard to be different, to try and do better, or in the end is it just a story of genes, and no matter how hard I try, I was screwed before I was even born?" (page 74) Do you believe this is a realistic way of thinking? Why or why not? What events/factors in Faith's life have caused her to think this?
 - ▶ Science Extension (based on the question above):

Faith's questions are related to the nature versus nurture debate. Research the debate and decide which side you are on. Write a persuasive piece arguing the side you have chosen.

Research component to above question: Research addiction and genetics. Cite specific information in order to support or dispel Faith's beliefs.
- ▶ Examine the following settings and analyze what they reveal about the situations and characters in the scene:
 - Her Aunt T's house (page 17)
 - Melinda's apartment (page 52)
 - Dr. Wydner's office (page 76)
 - Dr. Monroe's office (page 108)
- ▶ What other settings in the book help to reveal information about the situations and characters in that specific scene?
- ▶ Faith's mother's heroin addiction didn't just affect her. Who else is affected by her addiction and how? Analyze the ways in which each individual character is affected and explain how.
- ▶ What does the white bird symbolize to Faith? Why is it important?
- ▶ Throughout the novel, Faith turns to music to deal with certain situations. Analyze her song selections by looking at the titles and explain how they help to demonstrate more information about the specific scene. (Additional analysis: Look up the song lyrics and discuss how they also relate to the situations.)
- ▶ Faith tells Jesse, "You know what I think about sorry? I think sorry is an excuse to do whatever you want and then think you can make up for your behavior with this one tiny word that frankly, without a little more to go on, means nothing." (Page 143) Where has Faith seen this proven true to her in the story? Discuss specific characters and situations.
- ▶ Faith thinks about a poster she saw in Martha's office that said, "For a tree to become tall it must grow tough roots among rocks." (Page 154) Discuss specific examples in the book where we see Faith doing exactly that.
- ▶ Faith thinks, "Happiness, joy, love. They're all just illusions. A trick of brain chemistry." (Page 155) What makes her believe this? Do you think she still thinks the same way at the end of the story? Why or why not?
- ▶ In what ways was Faith's mother a good mom? In what ways was she inadequate? Support your response with specific examples from the book.

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- ▶ There are multiple opportunities where Faith reflects on the path her mom could have taken, specifically when she visits Melinda or the homeless man she encounters on the street, “We pass a guy swaddled in blankets, his life possessions in a shopping cart next to him. I meet the guy’s eye as we pass, the wounded crazed look of someone messed up by life, war, drugs, who knows what. Staring into the guy’s eyes I shudder thinking how easy it would’ve been for Mom to end up in the same place, discarded and thrown to the streets. A junkie-addict-alcoholic-aren’t-they-all-the-same homeless person that people go out of their way to avoid.” (Page 164) What do you think it was that kept Faith’s mom from becoming like these peoples? Explain your view in detail.
- ▶ Anj tells Faith, “You’re too scared to get close to anyone. I guess I thought eventually you’d open up or at least trust me. I wanted to be your friend, but you would never really let me be. I mean I get it. You took me to that place in West Philly where you used to live.” (Page 224) Do you believe this is a true assessment of Faith? Why or why not? Explain with specifics from the novel.
- ▶ How does perception play a role in the novel? Examine how specific characters are viewed or how they view themselves (because of how they look, where they are from, their backgrounds, etc.) and how these views affect the plot. The characters in this book are weighted down by expectations (specifically Faith, Jesse, Faith’s mom). Identify each character’s expectations and explain how he/she tries to defy or subvert their expectations. How are they successful? How do they fail?
- ▶ When Faith and Jesse are talking in the school theater, Jesse walks around on the play’s sets and says, “I’m Romeo. You’re Juliet.” (Page 230) How is this a correct assessment of their relationship? Explain using specifics from the novel.
- ▶ Which characters are on Faith’s side? Explain how with specific examples from the novel. Which characters aren’t on her side? Explain why. Do you believe that she is appreciative of the people who are on her side? Why or why not?
 - ▶ Science Extension Question:
Explain (using the scientific terms and evidence in the book) exactly what Faith uncovered that was being done to her mother. How was her mother essentially a human guinea pig?
- ▶ Jesse says that Faith’s problem is that, “You underestimate your friends.” (Page 246) In what ways has she underestimated them? In what ways do they come through for her? Support with specific evidence from the novel.
- ▶ *Death Spiral* shows both how society views addicts and the type of people they really are. Discuss how society views/treats Faith’s mother and who she really was.
- ▶ Why do you believe society views addicts in this way? How is this perception damaging to an addict? Explain in general and specifically how it damages Faith’s mom.
- ▶ While the Rat Catcher would be called an antagonist, in what ways has he also been a victim?
- ▶ Jesse tells Faith about going to work on a ranch in the summer and she gets the feeling that he is inviting her along, “It’s an invitations, I know, but I don’t answer.” (Page 300) Do you think that she will go? Why or why not?

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- At the end, Faith makes the choice to shape her future. She states, “I was given a starting place, the rest—what truths to reveal, what lies to tell, whether I give up and give in or stand up and fight back—that part is up to me.” (pg 301) What do you think will happen beyond this book to Faith? What choices will she make/what path will she take? Support you hypothesize with specifics from the novel.
- The night before the conference, Faith has a dream about her mom:
“I dream of the white bird. It lands on a high branch of the oak outside my bedroom window. I climb the tree and reach out to touch the winged creature. Just as I’m close enough to stroke its silky body, the bird transforms into my mother. She’s wearing her white bathrobe. Blood trickles from her mouth to her chin. I scream, and the bird vanishes into the moonless night.” (page 274)
What do you think this dream means? How does it relate to the novel?
- At the end, Faith states, “I’m not angry anymore. No more blame. No more guilt. No more lies or hiding.” Look back into the book and identify what she was angry about, who she blamed, what the guilt was that she was holding, and the lies that she hid.
- The title of the novel is *Death Spiral*. Analyze and explain the title of the novel. Why is it important to the story?
- Who are the secondary characters in the novel? Explain how each of these secondary characters are important and what they contribute to the novel.
- We read books for enjoyment, but sometimes we discover that they can teach us things. What have you taken away from *Death Spiral*?
- *Death Spiral* is written in first person POV. Select a scene in the novel and re-write it in a different POV. What POV do you like best? Explain your choice.

This guide aligns with Common Core Standards ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10 1, 2, 3, 9, 10 and ELA-Literacy.WL.9-10 1 and 2.



About Janie Chodosh

I have been listening to teens and young-adults for most of my adult life. As a middle school and high school English teacher, I am immersed in the voices of young people. Daily, I listen to their irony and wit, their drama and humor. It is these voices that fuel my desire to write for young adults. Besides being a writer and a teacher, I am a mom, an avid outdoors person, reader, and observer of life. I am also a scientist wannabe—however, since I realized I only liked to muck around in the field in cool places and would never actually be a scientist, I married one. When not writing, I like to hang out with my family, rock climb, try to grow a garden in the arid southwest, bird watch, travel, and attempt to play Klezmer music on my violin.

Find Janie online at www.JanieChodosh.com