

The Otherworldlies: A Reader's Guide

About the Book

Fern McAllister may be able to predict the weather and communicate with her family dog, but she's also the kind of girl who has trouble making friends and seems doomed to spend the entirety of middle school hiding up in a tree with a book. When she accidentally teleports to the beach from English class one day, she realizes that she is really, truly different from the girls in her seventh grade class who make fun of her. But she tries to keep her suspicions about herself secret, worrying that her differences will alienate her from her family. Her twin brother Sam soon figures out Fern's secret and vows to help her discover the truth. Working together they learn that Fern is a member of The Otherworldlies – an ancient vampire sect – and may even be one of The Unusual Eleven who are thought to possess unique powers. She becomes the target of another vampire sect, the blood-drinking Blouts, as well as a person of interest to the suspicious Vampire Alliance. Fern must learn to stand up for herself and her loved ones, speak truth to power, *and* figure out how to make friends in the seventh grade. Can she do it?

Questions for Discussion

1. Fern questions Lindsey's motivation when Lindsey, a girl who's a "social force of nature" at St. Gregory's, befriends her, the "weakest of the herd." Does Lindsey need to have a reason to be friends with Fern? What does this say about seventh grade politics? Do you think it's true outside of middle school that people need to have a reason to be close to others?
2. When Lindsey and Fern first become friends, they melt onto the bathroom floor in a "heap of giggles and hair." How did you first bond with your friends? What does Fern learn about making (and keeping) friends in this story? Can you make any connections to her struggles?
3. Jennifer Anne Kogler dedicates this book to her "very own Sam and Eddie." What people make up your support system?
4. Mary Lou McAllister doesn't mince words when she talks to Chief Quagmire at the end of the story: "She's not joining your Alliance. She's got her very own alliance right here in this house!" But Fern's behavior gains her allies outside of the home, as well. What does her treatment of Telemus, Chuffy, and others who are marginalized by the V.A. say about her? In making her own team, does she eliminate the need to pick sides between Vlad and the Alliance? Does making the choice to stay out of Alliance politics eliminate the need to make a choice about staying a Rollen or becoming a blood-drinking Blout?
5. Fern and Sam may not be biological twins, but they do share a special relationship – Sam is Fern's defender, shares her secrets, and sticks with her even when neither sibling is quite sure what path to take. But there are also moments where he's jealous of his sister and her powers. Think about someone who's close to you. If one of you has an experience that can't be shared, what does that do to the relationship? How can you renew your bond with that person?
6. It takes a long time before Mrs. McAllister is prepared to believe the truth about Fern – why does she think Fern lied about what happened at Pirate's Cove after she first teleports? Why, when confronted with two realities, would she choose to believe the one that "wouldn't keep her up at night"? Have you ever told the truth to someone who didn't believe you? Why do you think they had a hard time accepting the facts? When someone loses your trust because they don't believe you, is there anything they can do to regain that trust?

7. Sam tells Fern that superheroes like Lance Armstrong or Einstein are “good freaks.” What are the Otherworldlies? Are they superheroes, or freaks, or both? What makes certain people special? What makes us admire some of the people who are different from us but ridicule some of the others?
8. Relations between Normals and Otherworldlies are colored with fear, and several characters make it clear to Fern that they believe humans destroy all the things they do not understand. Do you agree or disagree? Cite examples from the book and from the real world. Then consider Vlad’s statement that “you cannot love something that terrifies you” (214). Do you believe him? Why, or why not?
9. What is the significance of the giants’ admonition (“Nothing in Excess”) given the larger context of the book and the world?
10. What do you think about the Rollen philosophy? Vlad doesn’t accept that he and his followers should file down their fangs and pretend to be the same as Normals – is there any way in which he’s being reasonable? Why should the Rollens continue to hide who they are? If the Normals will really persecute them and exterminate them, is there hope for the Rollen philosophy? What will the Rollens have to do before they can come out from underground and see the integration initiative through?
11. Fern’s not a bad person, so why is she scared that she’ll become a Blout? Why does she worry that there’s a darkness inside her that she can’t control? Can you relate to her – have your feelings or desires ever surprised you? Telemus tells Fern that Phoebe was on the right side “in the end.” Does being on the right side at the end atone for mistakes you’ve made along the way?
12. Chief Quagmire says, “There is little that separates the actions of those whom we deem good and evil. It is the *cause* a person serves that history judges and the results that a person produces.” Do you agree or disagree? Are there actions that are inherently wrong, or can the ends justify terrible means?
13. There are vampires in this story who want to abandon that term because it’s “too laden with terrible baggage” – they prefer a more “politically correct” name for themselves, like “Otherworldlies.” Is changing the word used to describe a group of people possible? Does it make a difference what they call themselves if there are still Blouts who drink blood and live up to the stereotypes?

14. Many of the characters in this story fit into the role of the protector – Sam, Eddie, and Mrs. McAllister all do what they can to protect Fern from the viciousness of seventh grade girls, and later she does her best to protect them from Vlad and the Hundred-Handers. But there’s a gray area in the middle of the story when the McAllisters are unable to protect Fern from the Alliance because they simply don’t know enough and Fern has trouble protecting them because she can’t control her powers. What is each member of the family feeling in the middle of the story? What is it like to be unable to protect someone you love?
15. There are special places like the beach at Pirate’s Cove or Carlsbad Caverns where Fern tingles with pleasure and feels like she’s at home. What about you? Do you know places that seem perfect? If you could teleport, where would you go? What places would be in your *Disappearance Directory*, and why?

Activities and Writing Projects

1. Fern made the front page of both the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Orange County Register* because the pictures of her were “the stuff that photo editors dream of – a frightened little girl holding on for dear life above the surreal backdrop of the Magic Kingdom.” Consider what’s appealing about the image, then write news copy or TV coverage for one of the events in *The Otherworldlies*.
2. This story has its own vocabulary – not only are there Rollens and Blouts, but there are also Poseidons, Hermes, and other kinds of vampires, as well as allusions to Titanomachy, Cronus’s Curse, and other mythologically-inspired people and events. Devise your own classification system for Otherworldlies. What can you add to the world created by Jennifer Anne Kogler?
3. Choose one of the references to Greek mythology or vampire lore that interests you. Write a short essay describing your findings in a way that would catch your classmates’ interest, or let your findings inspire a short story about someone who, like Fern, finds herself confronting myths in the modern world. Who has the powers you’ve envisioned, and how do the powers change your character’s life?
4. Sam and Fern visit a preserve where “indigenous creatures” are kept sheltered from the humans’ above-ground world where they would be exterminated. Draw one of the creatures in

the preserve, design its enclosure, and write a short blurb explaining what visitors would find if they visited your part of the preserve.

5. The story is set in California – Fern does visit famous landmarks like Disneyland, but the setting also informs the story in a more subtle way. Research some of the real places or creatures described in the story. Once you’ve found out a bit more about San Juan Capistrano, the migration of the swallows, and the looks of a jacaranda tree, is it harder or easier to visualize the events of the story? Try writing another scene where setting influences the story.