

A Reading Group Guide to

# SKANDAR AND THE UNICORN THIEF

by A.F. STEADMAN



## ABOUT THE BOOK

Skandar Smith has always yearned to leave the Mainland and escape to the secretive Island, where wild unicorns roam free. He's spent years studying for his Hatchery exam, the annual test that selects a handful of Mainlander thirteen-year-olds to train to become unicorn riders. But on the day of Skandar's exam, things go horribly wrong, and his hopes are shattered . . . until a mysterious figure knocks on his door at midnight, bearing a message: the Island is in peril and Skandar must answer its call.

Skandar is thrust into a world of epic sky battles, dangerous clashes with wild unicorns, and rumors of a shadowy villain amassing a unicorn army. And the closer Skandar grows to his newfound friends and community of riders, the harder it becomes to keep his secrets—especially when he discovers their lives may all be in graver danger than he ever imagined.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What words would you use to describe this book to a good friend? Did you enjoy reading it? Why or why not? Be specific: What did you like about the plot, the characters, the setting, the genre? How does it compare with other books you may have read in the fantasy genre?
2. What was your response after reading the book's prologue? What events did the prologue foreshadow? How would you describe the tone this prologue sets up for the rest of the book? What questions did you have after reading the line, "Because unicorns don't belong in fairy tales; they belong in nightmares." How did this prologue challenge your previous beliefs about unicorns?
3. How would you summarize the main plot of *Skandar and the Unicorn Thief*? Can you identify and share a short summary of any subplots or secondary story lines? Did the main plot or any of the subplots surprise you in any way? What did you find most surprising? Were there any elements of the story that you recognized or found similar to other fantasy novels you've read in the past?
4. With the opening words of chapter one, we are introduced to Skandar Smith, the book's titular character. Talk about how this chapter introduces Skandar, his family, and the unicorn riders. What did you learn about each that creates a foundation for the events to follow?
5. Consider what you learned about the three people in Skandar's family. How does the author make it clear that Dad is struggling with mental health? Why is he "desperate for one of his children to become a rider?" (Chapter one) How has their father affected Kenna's and Skandar's reputations and behavior at school? What is the Smith family dynamic like? Why do you believe Skandar and Kenna are so close, and why have they drifted apart recently? Why do you think Skandar feels some responsibility for his dad's well-being?
6. Even though Skandar and Kenna are close, they're very different. Which character do you connect with more? What do you admire about each of them? Is there anything you don't like about one of them? Does theirs seem like a typical sibling relationship?
7. How are Kenna and Skandar different when it comes to dealing with bullies? Identify the different bullies portrayed in the story. Does the author make you feel sympathetic toward any of them? How does Skandar know "it was a mistake to reveal any piece of personal information to a bully?" (Chapter twelve) What events caused him to decide he wouldn't put up with bullies any longer? What is it about Skandar's personality that makes it easier for him to stand up to bullies to protect his friends, but not himself?
8. Discuss the overall setting of the story. What are some ways Skandar's world is different from yours? Technology doesn't work on the Island, thanks to all the magic from unicorns and riders. How would you feel about giving up your cell phone for the chance to become a unicorn rider? Where riders are concerned, how are Mainlanders different from Islanders? Why were the Mainlanders invited to try the Hatchery door?

9. What are some pros and cons to becoming a unicorn rider? Discuss why Flo was so nervous about becoming a rider. If you were a rider, which one of Skandar's quartet are you most like? Which one is your favorite and why? Skandar likes how Bobby doesn't seem to care what anyone thinks of her. What do you most admire about some of your friends, and why?
10. Each rider in a quartet is allied to a different element: air, earth, fire, or water. The book gives a few examples of character attributes that match up with elements (like anger and fire). Can you think of other attributes and which element they represent? Which element would you feel a pull toward, and why?
11. Skandar displays courage when he's told he can't take the exam but confronts the rider in charge and demands his chance anyway. Compare his bravery to other characters' less courageous behavior. Identify some other occurrences in the book when Skandar is brave, as well as some scenes when he is not. What are the differences between those situations?
12. Skandar is skeptical when Agatha tells him he's special, but he decides to go with her anyway. "After all, he'd spent his whole life trying to be like everyone else, and it hadn't exactly worked out for him so far." (Chapter four) She also tells him he has a good heart. What do you believe makes Skandar special?
13. When Skandar meets his first wild unicorn, he is frozen with fear: "His brain kept short-circuiting: *run, freeze, scream, run, freeze, scream.*" (Chapter seven) What situation or creature would scare you that much? In the midst of his fear, Skandar is able to feel compassion for the wild unicorn too. In what ways can you examine something that scares you and see it from another perspective? How can you practice compassion and empathy for something or someone you might not get along with well?
14. The Commodore of Chaos tells the riders that they will have "power beyond your wildest dreams . . . all that I ask of you is that you use that power for good." (Chapter nine) What do you think she is referring to? What do you think are examples of people using power for good, both in Skandar's world and yours?
15. Why do you think the author chose to portray so many difficult parents in this book? Bobby says to Skandar: "Being let down, especially by parents, really is the worst." (Chapter sixteen) Name some examples from the book when parents let down or disappointed their children. Why is it important for Skandar to face his mother and refuse to join her mission?
16. In chapter fourteen, the imprisoned Agatha tells Skandar he must stop the Weaver. Talk about the role of the hero as the "chosen one" in this book and in other stories you've read or seen on TV and in movies.
17. When Instructor O'Sullivan gives Skandar his spirit wielder pin, she tells him: "Spirit wielders always did have courage and recklessness running side by side in their veins." (Chapter twenty-two) Which of Skandar's choices in the book might be described as reckless, even while they might also be brave?
18. How did you feel when you read the climactic scene in which Mitchell finds Skandar's name on the spirit tree? In what ways were you surprised by this? What clues did you notice in the book leading up to this point that hinted who Erika Everhart might be?
19. When Skandar and Scoundrel fly for the first time, Skandar "felt at that moment the least ordinary he'd ever felt in his life. He was a superhero. A wizard." (Chapter fifteen) Describe a time or situation that made you feel powerful or special.

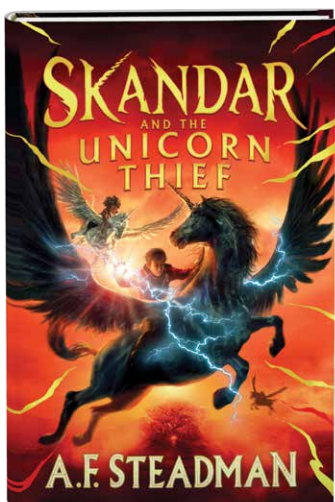
## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

### Writing

1. This book is the first in a new series, and the author gives some clues in the last few chapters about future events. Write a letter to the author, telling her what you think will happen in Skandar's next adventure, or what you'd like to see happen in the sequels. Use content from the first book to support your predictions.
2. There are some inventive unicorn names in the story, like Arctic Swansong, New-Age Frost, and Scoundrel's Luck. Imagine that you are going to attend the next Chaos Cup, and make a list of the top ten to twelve unicorns who will be competing, including your own unicorn. You can write up a full list of twenty-five unicorns and riders if you wish. In addition to naming them, write a descriptive sentence about each one, including what you believe is their allied element.
3. Pick three characters from the book and choose one character attribute that defines each of them. Support your answers with events from the book. (Example: Kenna is brave because she . . .)
4. Choose another book from the fantasy genre and read it. Write an essay comparing the settings of each. What common elements—setting, plot, characters, etc.—do the two books share, and what makes them different?
5. Create a proposal and an outline for a script of a movie or limited-episode television series based on *Skandar and the Unicorn Thief*. Would you change anything about the order of events or the characters involved? If so, explain your reasoning for these changes.

### Art

6. The author has imagined a rich alternative world for this story. Get out your sketchbook and draw one of the book's settings: a map of the Eyrie, Skandar's quartet's tree house, the Trough, or the Wilderness.
7. Draw a portrait of Skandar and Scoundrel's Luck in action, or of one of his quartet friends and their unicorn. What stood out to you about the characters' descriptions, and how did you choose to convey that in your drawing?
8. Create a recipe card with instructions and ingredients for making your own special emergency sandwich or other emergency snack. What makes your sandwich or snack special, and what kind of emergency would you need it for?



### Skandar and the Unicorn Thief

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