

A Reading Group Guide to

A Certain October

By Angela Johnson

About the Book

What would you do if your life drastically changed in an instant? Scotty is a regular teenager, looking forward to the upcoming homecoming dance. Besides the challenges she faces with her developmentally disabled little brother and the antics of her vivacious group of friends, she leads a pretty normal life. Scotty has a very loving family that supports her, despite the fact that they may be a little chaotic at times.

Then, an accidental run-in on a train with a boy from school changes her life forever. With the help of her friends and family, Scotty tries to return to her everyday life after the unexpected death of someone she was just starting to get to know. Can Scotty forgive herself, and persevere through recent traumatic events?

Prereading Activities

1. Research the author. Hold a class discussion about the author's choice to write about contemporary teens. How does she keep students interested in her stories? What are some situations where teenagers put themselves in danger? What are some situations that may need understanding, forgiveness, and acceptance?
2. Life-defining moments happen to all of us. Have students pick one life-changing moment and analyze it. How did it affect them? What or who helped to resolve the conflict most? How was closure achieved after it was resolved?

Discussion Questions

Please use examples from the text to support your answers.

1. Identify the main characters in the story—Scotty, Misha, and Falcone. How are their personalities similar? How are their personalities different? ***(R.CCR.1)**
2. In Chapter 3, Scotty uses a simile to compare her life to tofu. What does Scotty mean by this simile, and why do you think she chooses tofu? **(R.CCR.4)**
3. The author leaves the matter of what happened to Scotty's mother uncertain. What do you think happened? Why do you think the author does this? Who is Laura and what is her relationship like with Scotty? **(R.CCR.1)**

4. Scotty shares her point of view on many topics throughout the novel. What are her personal views on life, politics, and religion?

5. Evaluate the author's use of names for characters. **(R.CCR.1 or R.CCR.6)**

6. What are Falcone's and Misha's relationships with Scotty like? How do their relationships shape the theme of friendship? **(R.CCR.2)**

7. Why is going to the homecoming dance so out of character for Misha? Evaluate what her personality is like and why going to the dance in a dress is unusual for her. **(R.CCR.1)**

8. Provide examples of figurative language (idioms, similes, and hyperboles) and then determine their meaning. How does the author's use of figurative language advance the believability of the characters? Use examples of idioms, similes, and hyperboles from the text to support your conclusion. **(R.CCR.4)**

9. What is the cumulative impact on the author's use of syntax, diction, and word choice on the overall tone of the novel? **(R.CCR.4)**

10. Examine each of the following characters and explain how they interact with one another to advance the plot. How do they relate to Scotty? **(R.CCR.3)**

- A. Keone
- B. Gina
- C. Kris
- D. Jason
- E. Laura
- F. Scotty's dad

11. Specific race and ethnicities are never mentioned for any of the characters. Why do you think the author chooses to imply it rather than state it directly for each of the characters? What impact does culture have on the novel? **(R.CCR.3)**

12. In Chapter 7, Falcone is talking to Misha about the upcoming homecoming dance, and he asks, "What happened to everybody going as an intermingled pack?" What does he mean by "intermingled" pack? How are the main characters like an "intermingled pack"? **(R.CCR.3)**

13. A change in the plot sequence occurs in parts two and three. Why does the author manipulate time? How does the author's choice to structure the text enhance the drama and/or surprise in the story? **(R.CCR.5)**

14. Analyze the author's use of Keone's cookies, the trains, and the book *Anna Karenina* throughout the entire novel. How do these recurring motifs develop throughout the novel? How do they foreshadow what is going to happen in the novel? **(R.CCR.3)**

15. How is Keone flying through the air like Superman ironic? What is ironic about the train wreck? (R.CCR.6)

16. What influence does Scotty's interactions with Kris on the train have on Scotty? Why does Kris stay on the train? How does Kris and Scotty's relationship begin to change while on the train? (R.CCR.1)

17. What are some of the internal conflicts Scotty has after the accident? Why is she struggling to come to terms with the death of someone she barely knew? (R.CCR.3)

18. What role does forgiveness play in the plot? How does Scotty try to seek forgiveness? How do Misha and Falcone try to help Scotty come to terms with the accident? (R.CCR.2)

19. How important is family to Scotty? How does her relationship with her family help her to cope with the recent changes in her life? How does her relationship with her family contribute to the theme of the novel? (R.CCR.2)

20. Why does Scotty decide to get in the car with Jason? What are the consequences of her decision? Why does she ignore him after the incident in the park? (R.CCR.3)

21. Why do you think Scotty sends the photo of Kris to his mom? Why does she crop herself out of the photo? How do these details or actions contribute to the central message of the story? Summarize your answer objectively. (R.CCR.2)

Postreading Activities

1. Research the major themes in *Anna Karenina*. Compare the major themes in *A Certain October* to *Anna Karenina*. What commonalities are there? For Advanced Placement students, read *Anna Karenina* and compare themes in both novels. Have the students analyze the cultural and political impact of *Anna Karenina* on Russia. What does "realist fiction" mean? Compare the authors' points of view from both novels.

2. Analyze the author's use of names for each of the following characters: Keone, Falcone, Misha, and Scott. Research the names online and find the meaning of each. How does the author's choice of names reflect the personality traits of each character? Make the connections between what each name means and how the character acts or behaves. Cite textual evidence to support your analysis.

3. Write a letter to Kris's mom from Scotty's point of view. What would Scotty say to Kris's mother? What details are worth mentioning? Which details are not worth mentioning in the letter? How will this bring closure to Scotty? To Kris's mother?

This guide was written by Michelle Carson, Reading Teacher, Reading Endorsed, Palm Beach Central High School.

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