

A Curriculum Guide to

Inexcusable

by Chris Lynch

About the Book

Keir Sarafian declares that he is innocent of raping Gigi Boudakian. But that's not how Gigi sees it. Polluted with alcohol and high on drugs, Keir shows up at a graduation party where Gigi is brooding over her boyfriend's absence. The two leave the party together and wind up in a room all alone on a college campus three hours away. As Keir tells his story, he repeats "the way it looks is not the way it is." But Keir loses credibility as he relates past events of his senior year: a football accident when he crippled another player, acts of vandalism after a football and soccer breakup party, and late night drinking binges with his father. Through it all, Keir dismisses his bad behavior and attempts to convince his readers and himself that he is a good guy. But "good guys don't do bad things," and Keir Sarafian appears disconnected, angry, and in total denial of any of his violent actions. Is he guilty of rape? Does he live up to the nickname "killer" that he earned on the football field? Can he admit that his father hasn't been good for him? Will he ever accept responsibility for his inexcusable behavior or is he totally deluded?

Prereading Activities

1. The media is filled with stories about teenage crime and pranks that turned bad. School violence, rape, and illegal drug and alcohol use are common behaviors reported, but there are others. Read the newspaper for a week and collect stories that in your mind represent inexcusable behavior on the part of an adolescent. Share the stories with one another, and discuss what might be going on inside the head of the accused.
2. There are numerous attempts to censor books that young adults read, especially those that deal with sex and violence. Discuss why adults feel so threatened by teenagers' desire to read about these subjects. How might a book help a teenager deal with all that goes on inside and around them? Prepare a convincing remark to a parent who might object to these ideas.

Discussion Questions

These discussion questions align with the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (RL.9–12.1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6)

1. Keir Sarafian, the narrator of the novel, begins his story by saying, "The way it looks is not the way it is." How does this statement set the tone for the entire book? Who is he trying to convince of his innocence? Himself, the reader, or both? Point to specific places where Keir is an unreliable narrator. Why did the author choose to write the novel in a first-person voice? What is the effect of Keir sometimes addressing the reader as "you"?

2. The novel starts and ends with Keir and Gigi on campus in the present but most of the narrative takes place in the past, using the past tense, with interspersed short chapters set in the present. What is the impact of structuring the novel like this? How does it create suspense? How would the impact be different if the novel were entirely in chronological order?

3. When Gigi Boudakian accuses Keir of raping her, he says, "I don't feel like I am guilty. But I sure as hell feel sorry." What is the difference between feeling guilty and feeling sorry? Keir clearly has a crush on Gigi. Discuss whether he feels that "loving" Gigi justifies his behavior. Can a person both care about someone and also assault them?

4. In your opinion, is there any point in the story where you feel Gigi is at fault? Do you ever think the sex was consensual, and if so, why? Explain your position using details from the text. Rape victims are sometimes blamed if, like Gigi, they've been drinking alcohol. Do you agree with that view? If a murder victim has been drinking, does that place some of the responsibility of the crime on the victim? Why or why not?

5. How much were drugs a factor in what happened that night? Do you think they absolve Keir of his responsibility? If so, would you apply that standard to other crimes like violent assault or murder?

6. Describe Keir's struggle with self-image. Debate whether his self-image changes when he accepts the nickname "killer." How does Gigi perceive a relationship between Keir's nickname and his behavior? Social workers and psychologists who work in prisons often refer to the poor self-image of criminals. How might this be especially true with sex offenders?

7. After the football accident, Keir says, "I didn't cripple a guy. He got crippled, and I was part of it. The difference is very important." How is this comment devoid of any feeling for the victim? Keir tells his sisters that he isn't going to apologize to the guy because he didn't do anything wrong. Discuss whether an apology would be an admission of guilt. What do Mary and Fran realize about the situation that Keir cannot admit? Keir says, "I hate it when people I love condemn me." Debate whether his sisters are condemning him or trying to help him.

8. Describe Keir's relationship with his father. How reliable is Keir in his descriptions of his father? How does Ray contribute to Keir's inexcusable behavior? Explain what Fran means when she tells Keir, "I have to love Ray from a distance. He's not healthy for me. He's not healthy for you." There is only one scene in the novel when Keir calls Ray "Dad." What is the significance of this scene?

9. Keir really likes being liked, but he doesn't want to be buddies with anyone, because that requires involvement. Discuss whether this unwillingness to become involved contributes to his violent behavior. Do you think Keir would have raped Gigi had he been more involved with her?

10. Keir declines his father's offer to throw him a graduation party and instead chooses an all-night limo ride. How does the limo ride allow him to celebrate the evening from the outside? How is this consistent with his other behaviors? Describe Keir's arrival at Quarterback Ken's house. How is he playing into his "killer" role at the party?

11. At the beginning and throughout the novel, Keir refers to himself as a good guy. Why does he need for others to validate his good-guy image? When is this especially evident? Keir looks at the videotape of the soccer breakup party and comments, “I saw a good guy there. The film saw other things, entirely.” What is the significance of this scene? Is this an attempt to resolve the reality of the situation? Discuss whether he feels guilty or sorry after viewing the film.

12. At the end of the book, Keir talks about his “two hearts.” What do you think he means by this?

13. Chris Lynch raises questions about the athletic culture in high schools. How do coaches and the pressure to win contribute to a “boys will be boys” attitude? In Keir’s high school, the underclassmen take blame for the vandalism committed by the senior football and soccer players. Where are the adults when this occurs?

14. Anger, fear, loneliness, and a feeling of isolation are some of the emotions that Keir experiences. Which of these emotions are the most apparent? Discuss the relationship between anger and fear, and between loneliness and isolation. How does Keir allow his emotions to harm his life?

15. At graduation, Keir says, “Everything right now had the feeling of lasts, finishes, of playing out for good, forever.” What do you think of Keir’s finish? Debate whether he is changed forever.

16. Discuss whether there is an underground social culture at most high schools. What is the basis of the culture? How tough is it for teenagers who don’t belong to the culture? Discuss how such a culture is in conflict with the academic purpose of high school.

17. Discuss the title, *Inexcusable*, and how it reflects the novel’s content. In your discussion, analyze how Keir uses the word “inexcusable” at different points in the story. Consider how Keir makes excuses for himself in the narrative, and how the word “excuses” relates to the title.

18. While rape is widespread, affecting many girls and women as well as some boys and men, it is a hard subject to talk about. Discuss how approaching this or other difficult topics through fiction can make it easier to discuss them. What do you think was the author’s intention in writing about this subject? Why did he choose to use the perpetrator’s point of view?

Activities

1. While there has been a lot of publicity about predator (or date rape) drugs, experts point to alcohol as the drug most often involved in sexual assault. Have students research this topic, looking into drugs associated with rape such as Rohypnol, Gamma Hydroxybutyrate, and Ketamine Hydrochloride. The research should entail at least one print source and one credible online source such as a nonprofit, educational, or government website. Follow up the research with a discussion about the drugs, comparing the role of alcohol and drugs in sexual assault, and sharing any problems encountered in researching the topic.

2. Although the criminal charge for rape is the same whether the victim is a stranger or an acquaintance, people often call rape of a stranger just “rape” and rape of someone known either “date rape” or “acquaintance rape.” Have students break into small groups and discuss the labels, comparing their connotations. Why do people make these verbal distinctions? Does it change how people perceive the crime?

3. Concern about sexual assault on campuses has recently increased. In April 2014, the federal government published “Not Alone: The First Report of the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault” (www.notalone.gov/assets/report.pdf). In conjunction with the report, a website called Not Alone provides information and resources. Have each student analyze one of the websites listed on the Resources page (www.notalone.gov/resources/). They should determine who created the website and why, and assess how informative and helpful it is, then present a synopsis about its quality and content to the class.

4. Colleges and universities that receive federal funds, which include most schools, are required to publish crime statistics. Have pairs of students locate online campus crime statistic reports for the same year for two schools. Have the students compare the two reports, weighing factors like seriousness of the crimes (rape vs. burglary, for example) and ratio of student population to number of crimes. Students should produce a short written report about which school seems safest, addressing limitations of the data such as schools’ incentives to underreport crimes and the fact that these are reported incidents, not convictions.

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