

A Curriculum Guide to

Irreversible

By Chris Lynch

About the Book

Keir wants to get away. He's ready to leave behind the widespread belief that he raped Gigi Boudakian. He's ready to lose the nickname, "Killer," bestowed after he crippled another football player in a game. He's even ready to leave his father, Ray, who always defends him and takes his side, no matter the facts. On a 2000 mile bus trip, Keir hopes that everything will get better when he reaches his new college. But he has brought his troubled past with him, and the past, Keir finally realizes, is irreversible. The question is, can recognizing that be the first step to changing? In this powerful novel, Keir's unreliable voice immerses readers in the perspective of a sometimes-violent teenager who insists that he's a good guy—and that "good guys don't do bad things."

Discussion Questions

These discussion questions align with the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (RL.9–12.1, 2, 3, 5) (RL.11–12.6)

1. It's difficult for the reader to get a clear picture of Keir himself and the people in his life. What is it about his style as a first person narrator that makes it difficult? Discuss how reliable Keir is in depicting events and the people around him.
2. Discuss problems about, and inconsistencies in, Keir's descriptions of himself. Analyze why he repeatedly says "Good guys don't do bad things" and "I didn't do anything."
3. Describe the role of football in Keir's background and his sense of identity. Why did he get the nickname, Killer, and why does he want to drop it as a nickname?
4. Keir says, "We were a great family, a really, special, lucky family." How true does that appear to be, and why? What is the history of the family? Why have his sisters distanced themselves from Ray?
5. Discuss Keir's relationship with his sisters before and after he goes to Montana. What are the differences in how each sister treats him? When he returns to Montana, Keir says the following in regards to his sisters: "I expect not to see them again." Why does he think that?
6. Describe Ray, his strengths, and some of his problems. What is Ray's attitude towards Keir and how does it affect his son? Analyze why Ray says, "I should never have let this happen." Why does Ray keep insisting that Keir's "a good boy"?

7. When he leaves home, Keir says about Ray, “It felt like murder now, what I was doing. Leaving him bloody in the street.” Why does he say that? What are his other feelings about leaving Ray and leaving home, and how do you know?
8. Explain why Keir chose to travel by bus instead of airplane. How is the trip different than he expected? Who does Keir encounter on the bus, and what effect do they have on him? Discuss Keir’s attitude towards abusive men.
9. Why do you think Keir chooses not to call Ray from Montana and won’t return Ray’s calls? How does Ray react, and why? What is Fabian’s role in relationship to Ray?
10. Fabian is friendly to Keir from their first meeting. What kind of person is Fabian? Discuss why he wants to be friends with Keir, and how he shows his friendship throughout the story. Talk about times they clash, and why. How do you think Fabian will react to Keir’s story as they return to Montana?
11. Joyce also befriends Keir but their relationship becomes strained. Describe Joyce as a person, including her interests. Discuss Keir’s attitude and actions towards her, and why she becomes uneasy around him.
12. Keir and Coach Muswell have different versions of why Keir was given an athletic scholarship. Which version do you think is true, and why? What goes wrong for Keir on the team? Explain why Keir was kicked off the team.
13. Discuss the conversation between Kelly and Keir on pages 220-222 (in the hardcover edition). What is Kelly’s view of Keir? How does it differ from Keir’s view of himself? Who do you believe, and why?
14. Discuss each chapter’s title and how it relates to the content. Why is the book broken into large parts? What do you think the title of each part signifies?
15. Analyze Keir’s letter to Gigi. Discuss the parts that suggest he has changed and understands what he did to her. Are there portions of the letter that suggest he hasn’t changed?
16. “You said that I make things up to be the way I want them to be,” Keir says to Fran early on in the novel. Discuss signs, besides the letter to Gigi, that indicate Keir may be trying not to do this anymore.
17. Talk about Gigi’s reply to Keir’s letter. How does she feel about his letter? Relate her letter to the book’s title. Talk about why Gigi says that she’ll never be “done with it” and that Keir won’t either.
18. A quote from the Robert Burns’ poem, “To a Louse,” appears at the beginning of the book and on buildings at the college. How does the quote relate to Keir’s character? Find the entire poem and discuss the quote in context of the whole.

Extension Activities

In Real Life

Have students research the 2016 criminal case in which a Stanford student named Brock Turner was convicted of sexually assaulting an unconscious woman. How long was his sentence and why was it controversial? Compare Turner's crimes with Keir's. Review the statement that the woman who was assaulted by Turner read in the courtroom and compare it to Gigi's letter to Keir. Read the statement that Turner's father posted online and relate it to Ray's interactions with Keir. In your opinion, are the fathers responsible in any way for their son's crimes?

Up for Debate

Hold a debate about whether Gigi should have reported the crime to the police, and whether sexual assault victims in general should report. What are the benefits to society of reporting? How can reporting and possibly going through a criminal trial negatively affect the victim? Students can also address topics related to rape trials such as how and why rape victims are often held responsible for what happened to them; the role of drugs and alcohol in rape; and issues around athletes and rape.

Like a Jackknife, Like a Ceremonial Sword, Like Murder

Figures of speech enrich Keir's narrative and add to the novel's atmosphere. Have students make a list of 15-to-20 similes or metaphors from the narrative, including the page number for each. Next to each figure of speech, the student should identify the source of the imagery such as sports or war. Students should then meet in small groups to share their findings and discuss how each image helps create a tone for the scene and affects the reader.

The Unreliable Narrator

Keir's claims about what happened in the past or what's happening in the present can't be trusted, leaving readers to try to sort out the truth. Have a class discussion about the literary strategy of using an unreliable narrator, its purpose, its limits, and its effect on the reader. Then have students write short stories with unreliable first-person narrators and share them with the class.

Researching Rape & Society

Have students working in pairs or small groups choose a topic related to rape and research it using print and digital sources, with the goal of giving a multimedia presentation. The presentation should include a talk plus visuals such as charts, diagrams, timelines, or other graphic organizers that present facts and statistics. Here are some possible topics:

- History of rape and rape laws
- Comparison of rape laws by state
- The underreporting of rape to police
- News coverage of rape
- Rape in the military
- Rape on college campuses
- Rape kits
- Statutory rape

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