



A Curriculum Guide to:
*The List of Unspeakable
Fears*

By J. Kasper Kramer

About the Book

Essie O'Neill keeps a list of everything she's afraid of, such as rats, hard candy, ships of all kinds, and the sinister red door that appears in her dreams. Now that her mother has married the mysterious doctor who runs New York City's quarantine hospital, Essie's List of Unspeakable Fears continues to grow after she and her mother move to "plague island." Not only is the island known for a horrible tragedy, but the notorious Typhoid Mary is its most famous resident. When Essie learns of nurses gone missing, she is convinced her stepfather is behind the disappearances. For Essie to uncover the truth, she must face her worst fears, even if that means confronting what's behind the real red door down the hall from her bedroom. What she discovers will change her and her family's lives forever.

Discussion Questions

The questions and activities below particularly address the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: .RL.5.2; .SL.5.1.a-d; .W.5.2.a-b

1. Essie O’Neill is afraid of many things. Which fears on her list (and those that she removes from the list as the story unfolds) seem reasonable based on her life experiences, and which seem extreme? What is *dread*? For Essie, how are dread and fear related? Why do you think Essie expects horrible things to happen, such as “sewer gases escaping into the house”? How does Essie’s habit of asking “what if” contribute to her fear and dread? How does finally speaking about what scares her help Essie to be less afraid?

2. *The List of Unspeakable Fears* is rich in details of the period, especially the technological advancements of the early twentieth century. Essie is confronted with new technology, such as electric lights, telephones, and automobiles, all of which terrify her at first. How do these and other details help the readers visualize this place and time? Imagine you are Essie, experiencing something like flipping a wall switch and getting light in an instant. How might this act, something that is now a typical part of modern life, seem scary?

3. Discuss the lighthouse beam that comes into Essie’s bedroom each night. How does the alternating light and darkness mirror Essie’s conflicting feelings about her new home and life on the island?

4. One of the major themes of the story is coping with grief in the aftermath of loss. The death of Essie’s father was a traumatic event that affected both Essie and her mother. Why do you think happy memories of Essie’s Da often turn “sour”? How does Fräulein Gretchen’s story help Essie begin to process her own grief? How does the guilt that Essie feels about the night her father died keep her from processing her grief?

5. Anxiety is an “emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes like increased blood pressure. People with anxiety disorders have recurring intrusive thoughts or concerns. They may avoid certain situations out of worry. They may also have physical symptoms such as sweating, trembling, dizziness or a rapid heartbeat (source: apa.org).” How does this description of anxiety disorders from the American Psychological Association’s website describe what Essie experiences in the story? In the early twentieth century, people suffering from mental illnesses were often misunderstood and treated inhumanely. Dr. Blackcreek understood that people who suffer from what we now know to be anxiety disorders and depression were suffering from an illness that, with proper intervention, could be abated or cured. Read or reread chapter 31. How does Dr. Blackcreek’s conversation with Essie help her to begin to understand her feelings for what they truly are?

6. Essie has a vivid imagination. Discuss how Essie’s imagination both helps and hurts her. Provide specific examples from the text. How are Essie’s dreams and night terrors a product of both her lived experiences and her fertile imagination?

7. Throughout the story, there are people and objects that represent more than what they actually are: the red door, the sick bell, Mary Mallon. Discuss what each of these elements of the story symbolize.

8. From the very beginning of Essie's time on North Brother Island, she feels like an outsider. Why do you think she refuses to see the island as home? Essie suspects, "you have to be born surrounded by lavish things to feel like they're truly yours. No matter who my mother marries, no table this big will ever be ours." Discuss this statement. Do you think Essie is correct? Essie refuses to let Dr. Blackcreek into her life and her heart. Mams says to Essie, "If you insist on seeing him as a monster, though, that's what you'll keep seeing. You're the only one who can change your perspective." What does Mam mean by perspective? How and why does Essie eventually shift her perspective about her new home and stepfather? How does having distance from her life in the tenement help Essie begin to change her attitude toward her life on North Brother Island?

9. Discuss the character of Dr. Blackcreek and how Essie's feelings about him change over the course of the story. How did you perceive the doctor at the beginning of the story? How had your feelings changed by the end? Did you ever believe that Essie's assumptions about Dr. Blackcreek being a murderer were correct? Why? Essie bases many of her assumptions about her stepfather on his appearance. Why is it dangerous to judge a person's character based on physical appearance?

10. Essie's best friend, Beatrice, fancies herself a detective, and once on North Brother Island, Essie decides to investigate what happened to some missing nurses. Over the course of her investigation, she becomes less fearful about many things and begins crossing items off her list of fears. As Essie learns the truth about the nurses and also about Dr. Blackcreek's past, she confronts her own fears. Discuss examples from the story in which Essie must choose to hold on to her fantasies or embrace the truth.

11. *Bravery* is a word that appears throughout *The List of Unspeakable Fears*. Although Essie is afraid of many things, she is also incredibly brave. Discuss specific aspects of Essie's bravery. What does Beatrice mean when she tells Essie, "Not everything is a monster, even if it seems like it at first." How does the act of facing her fears in the attic free her from her worst fears and anxieties? Discuss what Essie means when she says, "I know that being scared is the first step to being brave."

12. Why is it so difficult for Essie to trust Dr. Blackcreek? Why does she begin to doubt her assumptions about her stepfather after he empathizes with her grief? Why does Essie consider her mother's siding with Dr. Blackcreek a betrayal of trust? Why is it necessary for Essie to trust Dr. Blackcreek in order to move past her fears?

13. The story is set in 1910 New York City. Read the author's note, focusing on aspects of the immigrant experience at this point in American history: poverty, disease, prejudice. Discuss aspects of the story that touch on what it was like to be an immigrant in New York City in 1910. What problems did immigrants to the United States face in the early twentieth century that still challenge immigrants today?

14. Mary Mallon, the notorious Typhoid Mary, mistrusts science. Dr. Blackcreek says, ““What I fear will spread is Mary’s mistrust of science. And her *fear*.”” Discuss Mary Mallon in relation to those today who spread misinformation about medical science. How can misinformation, believed by large numbers of the population, be as dangerous as a disease?

15. Do you think Essie really saw the ghost of Katherine Blackcreek, or was it a figment of her imagination or a very vivid dream? How does the author create suspense leading up to the scene in the attic? Would you describe this book as a ghost story? Why or why not?

16. Essie learns many valuable lessons over the course of the story. Discuss the following lines from the book, reflecting on what Essie has learned:

“All I could see was what I feared.”

“I remember all the frightening things I’ve already faced. I start breathing more steadily. And soon the outrageous thoughts seem just that—*outrageous*.”

““And being afraid of someone because of where they’re from—how they look or sound or the habits they have—it’s not really fair, I think.””

Extension Activities

1. **The Year Was 1910.** *The List of Unspeakable Fears* references many significant aspects of early twentieth-century American history. Have readers create a list of the subjects that interest them, such as the Women’s Suffrage Movement, immigration, Thomas Edison, child labor laws, etc. Create a class list that combines each student’s notes. Students can work independently, in pairs, or in small groups to research a subject. Give students an opportunity to present their research to the class.
2. **Infectious Disease, Then and Now.** In the early twentieth century, diseases like tuberculosis and typhoid killed millions of people. These infectious diseases spread more rapidly in populations where poverty and overcrowding were common. Compare the common infectious diseases from the early 1900s to those that have affected the most people in the first part of the twenty-first century, such as COVID-19. Research the different medical practices used in the early 1900s. How do they compare to today’s modern practices?
3. **Eyes on Immigrants.** Much of what we know about the immigrant experience in New York City in the late 1800s and early 1900s we know through photography. Photographers such as Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine documented the hardships that immigrants endured, as well as their contributions to American society and progress. Create a slideshow of photography focusing on immigration. As an extension, research contemporary examples of photography that reveal the multifaceted experiences of immigrants and refugees in the United States.

4. **List of Speakable Fears.** In recent years, depression and anxiety in young people have skyrocketed. Invite the school psychologist to your class to lead a discussion about anxiety, how to identify it, and how to cope with it. For more information about anxiety and depression in children, visit <https://cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/depression.html>.

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