

# READING GROUP GUIDE

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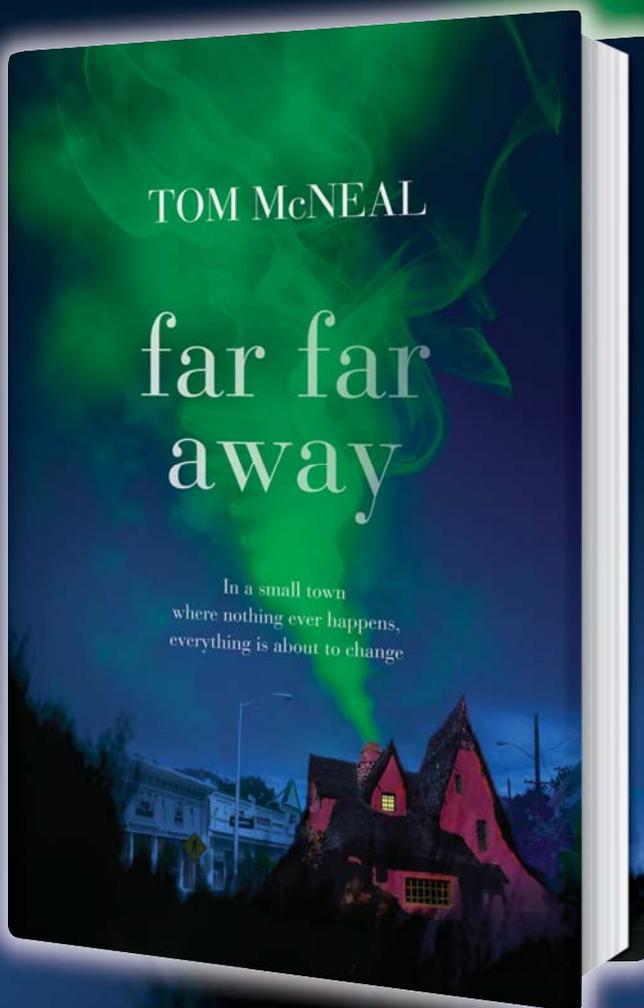
TOM McNEAL

# far far away

In a small town  
where nothing ever happens,  
everything is about to change



# ABOUT THE BOOK



Grades 7 up • 

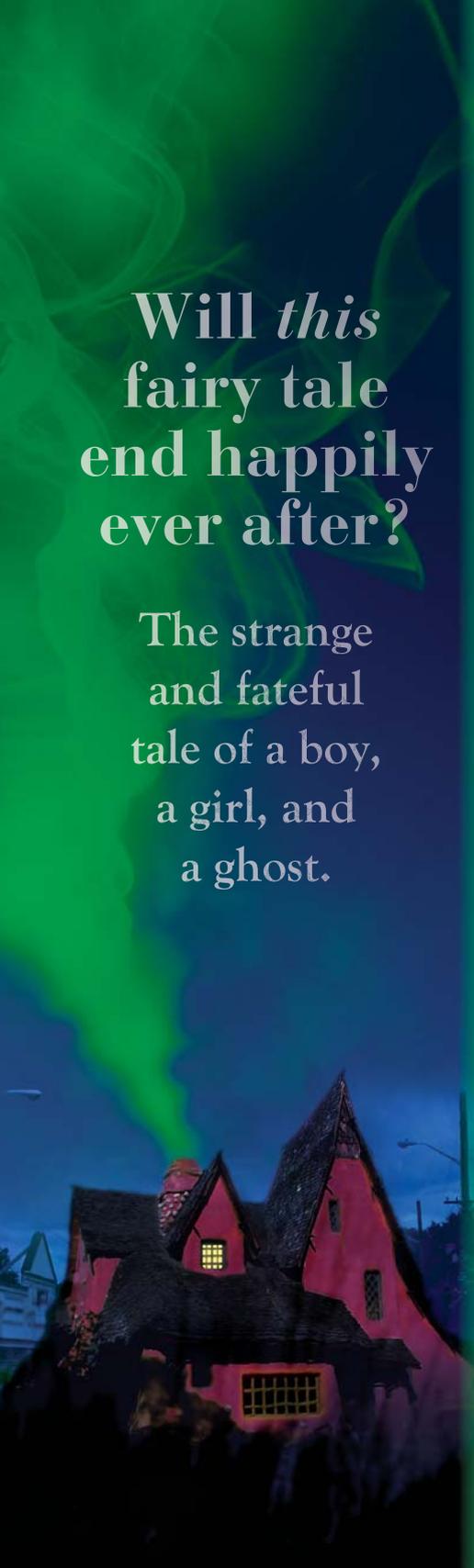
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Jeremy Johnson's life has begun to feel like a cruel fairy tale. He hears voices—"strange whisperings"—so the citizens of the small town of Never Better treat him like an oddity and an outcast. Meanwhile, his mother takes a bite of a cake so delicious it's rumored to be bewitched and runs away with another man. Jeremy's heartsick father goes into his room and stays there unhappily ever after. Then the town's coltish, copper-haired adventuress takes a bite of the enchanted cake herself and falls in love with the first person she sees: Jeremy. In any other place, this would be a turn for the better for Jeremy, but not in Never Better, where the Finder of Occasions—whose identity and evil intentions nobody knows—is watching and waiting, waiting and watching. . . .

Award-winning author Tom McNeal has crafted an enchanted and enchanting novel, a wholly original and addictive fairy tale that, like the cake of Never Better, will make you fall in love and take you far, far away.



# Will *this* fairy tale end happily ever after?

The strange  
and fateful  
tale of a boy,  
a girl, and  
a ghost.

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide was created in alignment with the Common Core State Standards and fits into the curricula for grades 7–12. Included you will find a variety of supplemental texts that range in length and complexity in the hope that they will enrich the reading experience of the text. Discussion questions and activities are text based, and challenge students to think critically about the craft and impact of the work. Teachers may wish to adapt questions and activities to best suit the grade and skill level of their students. In an effort to support educators, reference is made to specific anchor standards and grade standards where appropriate.

## PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Before reading, explore the *National Geographic* website for Grimm’s Fairy Tales as an introduction to the work of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, [www.nationalgeographic.com/grimm/index2.html](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/grimm/index2.html), and read an excerpt of Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s controversial *Addresses to the German Nation* to understand the cultural and political climate of their time at [archive.org/stream/addressestogerman00fich#page/248/mode/2up/search/conclusion](http://archive.org/stream/addressestogerman00fich#page/248/mode/2up/search/conclusion). How might their work have been impacted by this?

 Correlates to Common Core Anchor Standards  
CCR.R.1, CCR.R.4

# QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Who is the narrator? Is this a reliable narrator, and what details support your claim? How does McNeal’s choice to use this narrator affect the reader’s view of the other characters and of the mystery behind the Finder of Occasions? How does it affect the action in the plot? How might the story be different if told from a different point of view?

● Correlates to Common Core Anchor Standards CCR.RL.1, and RL.7.6, RL.8.6.

List as many fairy-tale allusions found in the text as you can. How does the use of all of these allusions enable McNeal to create a magical and mysterious adventure for his readers?

● Correlates to Common Core Anchor Standard CCR.RL.4.

Jacob tells the reader that in the old tales “kindness is the purest form of heroism” How does McNeal develop this theme throughout the novel? Is this theme true in modern fairy-tale retellings? Is this true in life?

● Correlates to Common Core Anchor Standards CCR.RL.1, CCR.RL.2.

McNeal alludes to the Grimm brothers’ “Hansel and Gretel” when Jeremy and Ginger enter the woods to follow the baker. How does McNeal adapt the Grimms’ story and how do the changes affect the suspense in his novel? Compare and contrast Grimms’ “Hansel and Gretel” to a similar tale from another country or culture. What likenesses and disparities do we see, and how might the culture and historical context play a role in how the story was translated or adapted? Use the SurLaLune Fairy Tales website, [www.surlalunefairytales.com/hanselgretel/other.html](http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/hanselgretel/other.html), as a reference.

● Correlates to Common Core Anchor Standards CCR.RL.9, and RL.9-10.6, RL.11-12.6.

Do you agree or disagree with Jeremy’s final decision at the game show? Why? Would you have done the same? How do the other characters react to Jeremy’s choice (his father, Ginger, Jacob), and how do their reactions signal growth in their relationships?

● Correlates to Common Core Anchor Standards CCR.RL.1, CCR.RL.3.

Read aloud Shirley Jackson’s short story *The Lottery*. Compare and contrast Jackson’s and McNeal’s exploration of public conformity and mob mentality. Which techniques do the authors use to convey their points of view? Discuss whether the differences in genre (short story versus novel) and structure affect the reader’s understanding of these ideas.

● Correlates to Common Core Anchor Standard CCR.RL.5.

McNeal refers to Jacob’s “thing undone” throughout the novel. Discuss the impact of McNeal’s word choice on meaning and tone. How would you describe Jacob’s “thing undone” and what evidence supports this? How might you also relate this idea to the other characters and to the town of Never Better? What are their “things undone”?

● Correlates to Common Core Anchor Standards CCR.RL.1, CCR.RL.4.

Does McNeal end his novel “happily ever after”? How does McNeal’s choice to include the conversation between Jacob and the baker affect the reader’s outlook on the idea of a happy ending? (pp. 356–357) Are you satisfied with McNeal’s ending in *Far Far Away*? Why or why not?

● Correlates to Common Core Anchor Standard CCR.RL.5.

● Questions for Group Discussion also correlate to Common Core Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening: CCR.SL.1, CCR.SL.4, CCR.SL.6.

# WRITING AND MULTIMEDIA ACTIVITIES

## Write a Fractured Fairy Tale!

Select one of Grimms' stories and retell that story in a new and unique way. Consider changing the characters, point of view, ending, time period, or setting. As you write your narrative, be sure to include at least one of the techniques that McNeal uses throughout his novel (e.g., foreshadowing, symbolic names, motifs, allusions, dramatic irony, dialogue, etc.). Share your fractured fairy tales aloud and see if your classmates can guess which fairy tale you've adapted and where you used McNeal's techniques. You might wish to refer to the Web resource: [www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/fairytales](http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/fairytales).

 Correlates to Common Core Anchor Standards for Writing: CCR.W.3, CCR.W.4, CCR.W.5, CCR.W.6, CCR.W.10.

## Listen Up!

Read aloud the opening paragraphs to the novel. How does McNeal set the mood in these few short paragraphs? Now prepare to listen to the same text spoken on the audio edition. Highlight words or phrases you expect the actor to emphasize. Take turns reading these highlighted sections and trying out different inflections. Now listen to the audio. In what ways does the performance align with or depart from your expectations? Do the actor's decisions enhance the mood or detract from it? Select another paragraph from the novel to perform and record that you feel is particularly poignant. Share your recordings with the class and analyze each other's vocal decisions and effectiveness.

 Correlates to Common Core Anchor Standards for Reading Literature: CCR.RL.7 and Speaking and Listening: CCR.SL.6.

## ON INSPIRATION FOR *FAR FAR AWAY*:

*I always enjoyed fairy tales for the way they let you glimpse either your fondest wishes (seek your fortune and inherit a kingdom!) or your wildest fears (stepmom sends you into the forest!). Fairly often when reading some account or other in the newspaper (the kidnapping of Elizabeth Smart comes to mind), I'd think, "That's strange as any fairy tale." This got me thinking about writing a modern version of that genre. But the characters in most tales are flat, one-dimensional, almost stereotypes, which is not at all what's needed to bear the burden of a longer form like a novel. We—Laura was in on all this—began to think of telling the story from the point of view of a ghost. In researching fairy tales, I fell into reading about the Grimm Brothers, and the circumstances of their story was fascinating to me—Jacob and Wilhelm united throughout their lives, working together, Jacob living with Wilhelm even after Wilhelm became a husband and father, the awful death of Jacob's young nephew (and namesake). Jacob was the more somber and rigid of the two, and outlived his younger brother, on whose company and counsel he relied. The more I read about him, the more sympathetic he seemed, and I began to think of him as the right conduit for the story. And so, before very long, Jacob Grimm became my ghost. —Tom McNeal*

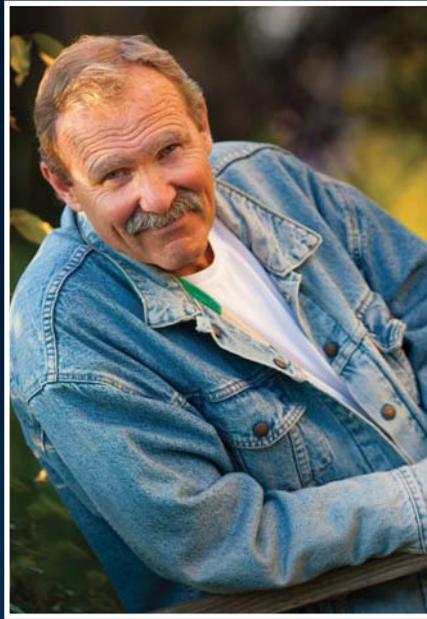
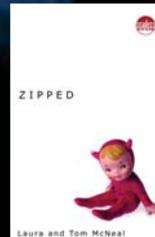
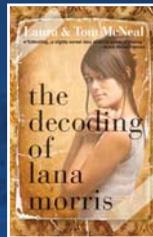
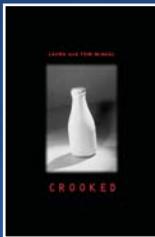


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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom McNeal has written several young adult novels with his wife, National Book Award finalist Laura McNeal: *Crooked*, *Zipped*, *Crushed*, and *The Decoding of Lana Morris*. He has also written two critically acclaimed adult novels, *To Be Sung Underwater*, named one of the five best novels of the year by *USA Today*, and *Goodnight, Nebraska*, winner of the California Book Award. He lives near San Diego with his wife and two sons. To learn more about Tom, as well as his books with Laura, please visit [McNealBooks.com](http://McNealBooks.com).



Prepared by Sharon Kennedy and Erica Rand Silverman, educational consultants and former New York City high school English teachers. Sharon also supervises student teachers at Teachers College and Erica Rand Silverman is a children's literary agent.

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