

“So much heart here. And so much talent.”
—Matt de la Peña, Newbery Medalist for *Last Stop on Market Street*

THE STARS BENEATH OUR FEET



David Barclay Moore

DISCUSSION GUIDE

ABOUT THE BOOK

It's Christmas Eve in Harlem, but twelve-year-old Lolly Rachpaul and his mom aren't celebrating. They're still reeling from his older brother's death in a gang-related shooting just a few months earlier. Then Lolly's mother's girlfriend brings him a gift that will change everything: two enormous bags filled with Legos. Lolly's always loved Legos, and he prides himself on following the kit instructions exactly. Now faced with a pile of building blocks and no instructions, Lolly must find his own way forward.

His path isn't clear—and the pressure to join a “crew,” as his brother did, is always there. When Lolly and his friend are beaten up and robbed, joining a crew almost seems like the safe choice. But building a fantastical Lego city at the community center provides Lolly with an escape—and an unexpected bridge back to the world.

David Barclay Moore paints a powerful portrait of a boy teetering on the edge—of adolescence, of grief, of violence—and shows how Lolly's inventive spirit helps him build a life with firm foundations and open doors.



Grades 5 & up

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PRE-READING DISCUSSION

- Look at the cover of the book. What information does it provide you as a reader? How does it make you feel?
- Before turning to the first page of the story, return to the title, the author’s dedication, and Richard Chenevix Trench’s quote. How are these three elements of the book related? What message do they convey? How do they prepare the reader for the story?

Correlates to Common Core Standard Reading Literature: Craft and Structure R.L. 6-7.5; Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration S.L. 5-7.1; Language: Vocabulary Acquisition and Use L. 5-7.5.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Family and Environment

- What do you learn about the setting of the story in chapter 1? Where does the narrator live? How does he feel about this place? Who do you think Jermaine is? Why would he “never, ever be coming home”? (p. 1) How would you describe the narrator’s mood? What helps you understand that that is how he is feeling?
- Steve says to Lolly, “If you only expose yourself to whatever everybody else does, you’ll never create anything new.” (p. 14) What do you think he means? Why did Steve present Lolly with *A Pattern of Architecture*?
- What do you learn about the narrator and his family? Why does Lolly ask, “Who would choose to be gay when they knew it was so much easier to be straight?” (p. 18) How does this question relate to Lolly?
- Lolly states that Rockit’s “console felt like it was a gift for another kid.” (p. 25) Why? Compare Steve’s and Rockit’s presents. How do these gifts influence Lolly’s decision to break down his Lego kits that are built “*exactly* how [they] appeared on the box”? (p. 9)

Correlates to Common Core Standard Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details R.L. 5-7.1, Craft and Structure R.L. 5-6.5, R.L. 5-6.6; Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration S.L. 5-7.1, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas S.L.: 5-7.4; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 5-7.1, Knowledge of Language L. 5-7.3.

Relationships

- The story starts with Lolly being followed by two older boys (Harp and Gully) and his explanation of how “crews” work where he lives. How does the author manage to transfer this feeling of being followed and under pressure throughout the story?
- Why does Lolly resist telling Mr. Ali what happened between him and Jermaine? How does he feel about it?
- Why does the author include flashbacks in which Jermaine is alive? What does the author achieve with these transitions?

- Why does Vega disappear from Lolly’s life after the incident with Harp and Gully? Do you think Vega is a supporting character or a main character? Why? When Lolly finally visits his friend, why does he have a heavy feeling in his chest after Vega shows him a gun he got from his cousin Frito? How does Lolly’s thought about “hoping for a life maybe making art” (p. 235) conflict with that feeling?
- Why does the author choose to create a sense of ambiguity when describing Vega and Lolly’s late-night walk in chapter 35? What is your reaction to the actual purpose of their walk? What does the gun symbolize?
- What does the coyote, Nicky, bring to the story? Why are these two quotes about Nicky important?
 - “Our coyote was part of a species in danger. Hunted down and shot up. We knew how it felt.” (p. 170)
 - “Our coyote was nowhere. Disappeared. Like everything else does sooner or later. Nicky was gone. Like Harmonee. Like Jermaine.” (pp. 244–245)
- Why does Lolly agree with Mr. Ali’s comment that a storage room became his world? How does Lolly’s world “[feel] hijacked” (p. 98) when Big Rose joins him in the storage room? Why is Big Rose there in the first place?
- Lolly describes Big Rose as “special” when the reader first meets her. (p. 56) How does the connotation of this word change throughout the story? How do Lolly’s classmates’ attitudes toward Big Rose change?
- How does the dynamic between Lolly and Big Rose change throughout the story? What would you say they have in common? When Big Rose cites the following quote, what does it tell the reader about her and her family? “Rosamund, when you die, they bury you, but your soul flies to the stars. Your mama, your daddy—they were buried under the ground, but they’re stars now, girl, stars beneath our feet.” (p. 164) What connection do you see to Richard Chenevix Trench’s quote?
- Lolly and Big Rose are building bridges out of Legos. What do their bridges symbolize?
- How would you define art? How does art make you feel? Do you agree with Mr. Ali that Lego constructions are art? Why or why not?

Correlates to Common Core Standard Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details R.L. 5-7.1, R.L. 5-7.3, Craft and Structure R.L. 5-7.4, R.L. 5-7.5, R.L. 5-7.6; Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration S.L. 5-7.1, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas S.L.: 5-7.4; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 5-7.1, Knowledge of Language L. 5-7.3, Vocabulary Acquisition and Use L. 5-7.5.

Grief and Acceptance

- Why does Lolly find more comfort in building a Lego castle than talking to Mr. Ali? What do the following thoughts indicate about Lolly’s inner state? “I wished I could lose [Ma and Yvonne] and Mr. Ali from out of my life.” (p. 43) “I’d rather keep closed. Nobody got me. Nobody cared.” (p. 60) How do you think he is coping with his brother’s death?
- While talking to Mr. Ali, Lolly realizes that he never thought about how Jermaine’s death affected his father. Is it okay to be selfish while grieving? Why or why not? Does Lolly see his mother’s grief?
- Lolly goes from “What I couldn’t get out of my heart was this joy-grabbing stone I felt there.” (p. 1) to “Ma’s face had made something true for me. From that whole Yvonne experience and looking back at Jermaine too, my rock was gone. I wouldn’t let it grow back.” (p. 269) List the occurrences that lead to this transition.
- Explain Vega’s suggestion to ask Steve “what he did to survive . . . [the] St. Nick projects.” (pp. 269–270) How does bringing up Steve at the end of the novel indicate a new stage in the boys’ lives?
- Explain the following metaphor: “Kids like us, me and Vega and Rose, were our own islands, living in a mad river.” (p. 270)
- What does the eventual removal of Jermaine’s bed from Lolly’s room symbolize?
- How would you explain Lolly’s decision to be called by his first name, Wallace, at the end of the book?

● Correlates to Common Core Standard Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details R.L. 5-7.1, R.L. 5-7.2, R.L. 5-7.3, Craft and Structure R.L. 5-7.4; Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration S.L. 5-7.1, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas S.L.: 5-7.4; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 5-7.1, Knowledge of Language L. 5-7.3, Vocabulary Acquisition and Use L. 5-7.5.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



David Barclay Moore was born and raised in Missouri. After studying creative writing at Iowa State University, film at Howard University in Washington, D.C., and language studies at l'Université de Montpellier in France, David moved to New York City, where he has served as communications coordinator for Geoffrey Canada's Harlem Children's Zone and communications manager for Quality Services for the Autism Community. He has received grants from the Ford Foundation, the Jerome Foundation, Yaddo, and the Wellspring Foundation. He was also a semifinalist for the Sundance Screenwriters Lab. David now lives, works, and explores in Brooklyn, New York. You can follow him online at DavidBarclayMoore.com, on Twitter at [@dbarclaymoore](https://twitter.com/dbarclaymoore), and on Instagram at [dbarclaymoore](https://www.instagram.com/dbarclaymoore).

PRAISE FOR *THE STARS BENEATH OUR FEET*

"*The Stars Beneath Our Feet* is a fast and furious read in which we meet some amazing people, people that stay with us. David Barclay Moore is an exciting new voice. We definitely haven't heard the last of his brilliance." —**Jacqueline Woodson**, winner of a Newbery Honor and the National Book Award for *Brown Girl Dreaming*

"*The Stars Beneath Our Feet* is about the weight of the world on the back of a child, and the creative tools necessary to alleviate that pressure. I found myself rooting for Lolly, and you will too." —**Jason Reynolds**, Coretta Scott King Honor winner for *As Brave as You*

★ "These characters are vibrantly alive, reconstituting the realness that is needed to bring diverse, complicated stories to the forefront of our shelves." —*Kirkus Reviews*, Starred

★ "Debut author Moore delivers a realistic and at times brutal portrait of life for the young people of color who are living on the edge of poverty." —*Publishers Weekly*, Starred