

Teaching Guide for *News of the Air*

Creative Writing Prompts

Think about a community where there are both insiders and outsiders (for example, both locals and tourists, workers and customers). Imagine a character who doesn't fit into that binary for some reason (like Allie who did not grow up in the Northwoods, and yet has lived there a long time). Describe what this community looks like from that character's point of view. Option: include a brief scene or interaction where they have a dialogue with someone who is an "insider" and then someone else who is an "outsider."

Think of an outdoor place—your favorite spot to camp, or a corner of your own yard, or a bus stop, or a playground. Write with sensory details to describe that place. Pause. Write about the same place again to describe that place at a different point in time—a different year or a different season. How has it changed? What has changed it?

Invent a character who might have done something bad or immoral, or even committed a crime. (This is similar to how Cassie and her friends are suspected of having bullied one of their peers). Write a scene in which that character does some simple action (drives to work; washes dishes, etc) with the idea in your mind that *they did do the bad thing*. Write the same scene where, in your mind, they *didn't do the bad thing*. Re-write the same scene, the same set of basic actions, but as if *even you the writer are not sure of the truth*.

Write a scene about teenagers visiting some place unlike their own home town for the first time.

Write a scene where a character is doing something seemingly normal and routine (like Cassie goes to her first day of school after being homeschooled) but for them it is their first time.

Discussion Questions

Literary Questions

1) To what extent is this novel dystopian? To what extent does it seem to be realistic fiction? Does it change your perspective on any events in the book if you read them as dystopic or realist?

2) A mother and daughter relationship exists at the center of the novel. In what ways does the conflict between Allie and Cassie seem to be specific to this story? In what ways does it seem to be universal, and to reflect something true about parent and child relationships?

3) There are a few situations in the novel fueled by characters believing different realities to be true. Allie seems to have a belief about how responsible her daughter was for Hattie's death, but

doesn't ask her daughter for her version; she also prefers her own truth about why Kate and the kids have come to the resort instead of Cassie's version. Similarly, Bud and Allie each hold different views of how the environment and economy around them are changing, and what they should do in response. Bud sees more people selling businesses and moving west and rich people adventure camping in the woods and thinks they should change with the economy; Allie sees the whole world as a place on fire or in trouble due to other environmental disasters and sees the people in the woods as homeless refugees. She believes her family should hunker in and hold on to what they have. Using evidence in the novel, can you make a case for who is right in any of these differing interpretations?

Craft Questions

1) Where does the availability and use of cell phones propel the plot—that is, create or complicate a problem or conflict? Where do cell phones facilitate pacing or release information readers need to know?

2) The novel is told in three points of view that alternate most of the time by chapter, though in the beginning and the end there are chapters where point of view switches within a chapter at a section break. How does shifting between points of view affect the plot of the novel? The pacing of the novel?

3) In Chapter 1, Allie and Bud have a conversation by phone. Read through with a partner and mark or list the different ways the writer shows the divide that has grown between this married couple. How does this come through in their dialogue, in its content and presentation, and in the narrative content interspersed with the dialogue?

In Class Activities

Find a map of Northern Wisconsin and Upper Michigan. Which cities and places in the novel seem to be real? Which are made up? Find and print a map of a place you have lived or you know well. What real places or real geographical features would you want to use in a creative project? Mark them—or draw in additional imagined places—on your map.

With a partner or small group, decide on three characters to work with. Working individually, each person should sketch their own idea of what each character looks like, including any details of hair, clothing, features, objects they might carry that are from the text or that you imagine. Then get together to compare your drawings. How did you see these characters in the same way? In different ways? Are there some physical appearance details for some characters that seem to matter more than for others?

Critical Response Writing Project

Does Eco Fiction Make a Difference?

Read the two linked articles and write a critical response of your own. Your critical response could be framed to answer one or more of these prompt questions:

- 1) Does writing about climate change make a difference?
- 2) Does *News of the Air* seem to fit the category of Eco Fiction, and if so is it a successful Eco Fiction?
- 3) To what extent should art respond to issues of the world, such as climate change?

<https://lithub.com/does-climate-fiction-make-a-difference/>

<https://lithub.com/is-climate-writing-stuck>

Other class projects:

Read reviews left for this book on Amazon or Goodreads. How do the reviews match your own opinions about the book? Consider writing your own review.

Contact the author to meet with your class! This can be arranged by Zoom. Author email: jstukenb@uwsp.edu

View some of the author's previously published short stories, available under the Portfolio on her website. What similarities do you notice? What differences?

Google the authors who supplied a "blurb" for the back of the book. (Sarah Stonich, Kevin McIlvoy, Faith Sullivan, Nickolas Butler.) Write a proposal for classmates, or for a real or imagined book group, recommending which of their books to read next, and why. Or, actually get the book, and write a paper comparing the book to *News of the Air*. What do the books have in common?