



HC: 978-0-8234-4552-3  
E-Book: 9780823446346 • Ages 8–12

## **ITCH** by Polly Farquhar

★ “A heartwarming story that encompasses serious issues.”

—*School Library Journal*, Starred Review

★ “Lyrical, pensive prose . . .

[a] meditative #ownvoices read.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*, Starred Review

### About the Book

**When everything around you is going wrong, how far would you go to fit in?**

Isaac’s sixth-grade year gets off to a rough start. For one thing, a tornado tears the roof off the school cafeteria. His mother leaves on a two-month business trip to China. And as always . . . there’s the itch. It comes out of nowhere. Idiopathic, which means no one knows what causes it. It starts small, but it spreads—and soon, it’s everywhere. It’s everything. It’s why everyone calls Isaac “Itch.”

He’s doing the best he can to get along—until everything goes wrong in the middle of a lunch swap. When his best friend, Sydney, collapses and an ambulance is called, Itch blames himself. And he’s not the only one. When you have no friends at all, wouldn’t you do anything—even something you know you shouldn’t—to get them back?

For everyone who’s ever felt out of place, this debut novel set in the Ohio heartland is a warm, funny, and sometimes heartbreaking look at middle-school misfits and misadventures. This engaging #ownvoices story is perfect for fans of *See You in the Cosmos* and *Fish in a Tree*.



## Classroom Discussion Questions

- The novel opens at the end of summer when Isaac and his friends are about to start sixth grade. Explain what Isaac means when he says there is a difference between “summer friends and summer rules and school friends and school rules.” Isaac hangs out with Nate during the summer. How does Nate act differently toward Isaac when school starts? Which other summer friends are different at school? Debate whether this is part of the growing-up process.
- Describe Isaac’s relationship with his parents. What are their expectations of him? Contrast his parents with Sydney’s parents. Isaac’s parents are engineers, and his mother is working in China for a few months. How does Isaac’s mother manage to parent him from a distance?
- Isaac and his parents have only lived in Ohio for three years. What is it about the people in Ohio that makes him feel like an “outsider”? Lucas was homeschooled until sixth grade. How does Isaac understand Lucas’s “outsider” status? How is school a social adjustment for Lucas? Explain how Lucas gets the nickname “Homer.” Why does Isaac say that Homer “talks like an essay”? Cite specific dialogue from the novel to support Isaac’s thoughts.
- The need to belong or “fit in” is a major theme in the novel. Isaac hates the nickname “Itch,” but accepts it when the kids at school insist on using it. How is this Isaac’s attempt to belong? What is your advice to kids struggling to “fit in”? Debate whether Isaac is correct when he says “fitting in” is just “dumb luck” or “magic.” What does Homer learn about “fitting in”?
- What is an urban legend? How do the kids turn the story about Nate’s dad into an urban legend? Nate is very bothered by the story. Lucas wants to nickname Nate “Mr. Soup.” Explain why Isaac tells Lucas that the nickname isn’t a good idea. What does Lucas mean when he says he believes in protocol? Debate whether Lucas is right when he says that Isaac doesn’t want to be on his team because he is afraid of not being on Nate and his friend’s team. Explain why Lucas thinks there is “power in numbers.”
- Isaac suffers from chronic itching that is idiopathic, which means no one knows what causes it. How does this condition affect his daily life? How does Sydney sympathize with his condition? Describe Sydney’s allergies. Why does Isaac blame himself when Sydney has a serious allergy attack at school? Explain how this incident challenges their friendship.
- Isaac works for Mr. Epple at the pheasant farm. Describe his relationship with Mr. Epple. Nate asks Isaac to steal a pheasant for him. How does this test their friendship? At what point does the reader know that Nate expects Isaac to honor his request? Explain why Isaac steals the bird when he knows that it’s wrong. Debate whether Homer is naïve when he thinks that Isaac is saving the bird’s life. What is Mr. Epple’s reaction when Isaac tells him that he stole two birds? How does stealing the birds make Isaac a hero to the kids at school?



## Classroom Discussion Questions—continued

- Discuss the following types of conflict in a novel: Man against Man, Man against Self, Man against Nature, and Man against Society. How does Polly Farquhar make use of each type of conflict in *Itch*? Which type of conflict is most prevalent? How does the conflict get resolved? Cite scenes from the novel to support your answer.
- At the end of the novel, Isaac begins calling “Homer” by his real name (Connor), and Sydney no longer calls Isaac “Itch.” What do these simple acts say about friendship, fitting in, and being true to oneself?

## About the Author



**Polly Farquhar** is the author of *Itch*, her debut novel. She earned her MFA in Creative Writing from Ohio State University, and her short stories have been published in literary magazines such as *Prairie Schooner* and the *Mid-American Review*. She is also the recipient of two Individual Artists Grants from the Ohio Arts Council. She resides with her husband and young daughters in Columbus, Ohio.

Like *Itch*, Polly has an idiopathic angioedema, and her daughters have managed life-threatening food allergies. Drawing on her own experiences, Polly Farquhar spins a tale of kids trying to balance the desire to be ordinary with the need to be authentic—allergies, itches, confusion and all.

*Guide prepared by Pat Scales, retired school librarian and independent consultant, Greenville, South Carolina.*

4/2020

