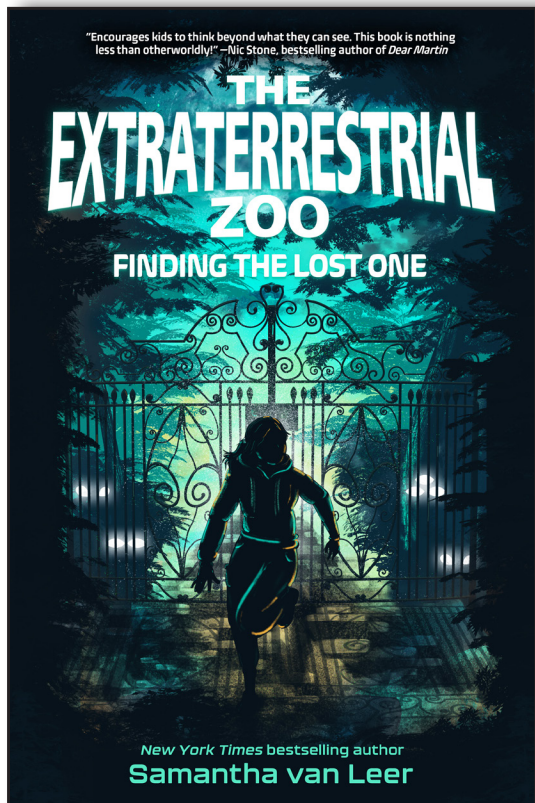


READING GROUP GUIDE



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The Extraterrestrial Zoo 1: Finding the Lost One

by *New York Times* bestselling author
Samantha van Leer

“Encourages kids to think beyond what they can see. This book is nothing less than otherworldly!”

—Nic Stone, bestselling author of *Dear Martin*

ABOUT THE BOOK

An out-of-this-world adventure!

They might be “aliens” to you, but to thirteen-year-old Ava they are always ELBs: Extraterrestrial Living Beings. When they arrived on Earth one by one, Ava and her parents hatched them and helped them survive on their new planet. The family’s zoo became a destination, and their lab became their life’s work. That was all before the ELBs stopped arriving, though. Before Ava’s mom died and her dad disappeared.

These days, Ava pretty much runs the zoo on her own, unless you count her distracted Uncle Pete and the clueless intern

he hired. It doesn’t matter that no one comes to the zoo anymore, or that now people see aliens as a threat. Someone’s got to keep them—and her family’s legacy—alive. But when a terrible storm shatters the zoo, scattering extraterrestrials across the Maine woods, Ava’s job becomes a matter of life and death. The ELBs can’t survive on their own. And who knows what would happen if they fell into the wrong hands? It’s up to Ava to find them before it’s too late.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- The question of whether life exists on other planets has been discussed and debated for a long time, and some people believe that if it does, other beings could have made contact without us knowing it . . . Do you believe that there are life forms on other planets? If so, what do you imagine they’re like? Do you think they have anything in common with any of the ELBs or do you imagine them to be completely different?
- Ava has grown up being mostly on her own, and she’s used to it, but early in the novel, her Uncle Pete tells her he’s worried about her not having friends. Harley tells her later that he understands “what it means to have everyone you love disappear. The feeling that if you were to go missing today, no one would even know you were gone” (p. 57). Discuss how the themes of loneliness and isolation thread through the novel. How does it impact other characters’ lives? How can you extend this to the ELBs?

- “Monsters” are mentioned throughout the story. Harley jokingly checks for them under Ava’s bed during the storm (pp. 54–55). Ava asks Harley to tell her something to prove that he isn’t a monster when they’re camping in the woods (p. 106). Some people see the ELBs as monsters. Who do you think are the real monsters in the novel? Why?
- Ava tells Harley, “When humans feel threatened, they will always choose themselves” (p. 81). Do you think that’s true? How can you connect this to our world today or events through history? How did the Alien Zoo try to approach those fears? What are some techniques we can use to break down feelings of threat or fear?
- Why did Ava’s father really leave her three years ago to go hide in the woods? Discuss this decision. What would you have done if faced with the same choice? Are there other examples of near-impossible decisions characters have to make in the novel? Have you ever encountered a situation where you feel like you’ll lose no matter what you choose to do, or when you’ve had to do something that feels wrong for the right reasons? How did you handle it?
- Ava is adamant that the ELBs not be referred to as aliens. “*Alien*. It’s an ignorant word . . . People use the word *alien* to mean something that doesn’t belong, something that’s not supposed to be here. All of the ELBs are meant to be here. This is their home” (p. 29). Do you agree with Ava? How does the idea of home change across the book?
- Harley tells Ava, “Not everything needs force to be controlled. You can give them a safe space to explore and understand you” (p. 23). Discuss some of the ways Ava, her dad, and Harley learn more about the ELBs when they’re given safety and more room to explore. How does General Krieger and the government’s approach to the ELBs clash with this statement? Are there other instances where giving a character a little space and security lets them open up more?
- On page 18, Ava says Wibsley is her favorite ELB because she’s an absolute goofball and she immediately puts her in a better mood. Which ELB is your favorite? Why?
- Why do you think the ELBs were sent to Earth to be cared for? Why do you think they stopped coming four years ago? What do you think will happen with them next?

ABOUT THE CREATOR



Samantha van Leer is the coauthor of the *New York Times* bestselling novels *Between the Lines* and *Off the Page*, which she recently helped adapt into an off-Broadway musical. *The Extraterrestrial Zoo: Finding the Lost One* is her debut middle-grade novel. A graduate of Vassar College, she also holds a master’s degree in education and was previously a fourth-grade teacher. She now writes full-time in San Antonio, Texas, with her husband, Frankie, daughter, Stevie, and their chaotic yet beloved puppy, Obi Juan Kenobi.