

## ***Ghost Boy***

### **Discussion Questions**

1. From the very beginning of the novel, Harold is on a journey. What is he looking for? Does he find it?
2. At no time during this journey does Harold stop and wonder about the consequences of running away. Why not?
3. Describe Harold's personality. Which of his characteristics do you find admirable?
4. "And across the wide front window of May's Cafe was a poem in slanting lines:  
He's ugly and stupid  
He's dumb as a post  
He's a freak and a geek  
He's Harold the Ghost." (p. 3)  
Harold has seen this cruel rhyme and heard the people of Liberty call him names such as Whitey, Maggot, and Harold the Ghost so often that he has accepted it all as true. How do other people's perceptions of Harold affect his perception of himself? How do others' perceptions of you affect the way you look upon yourself?
5. The Gypsy Magda asks Harold, "If you think that you are less than them, can you blame them for thinking they are better?" (pp. 88–89) Discuss the meaning of her question. When does Harold begin to see himself clearly? How has society tried to justify its treatment of minorities, foreigners, and others who don't fit into the conventional models of the community?
6. Harold struggles to exist between two competing worlds: the world of the sideshow performers and the world of the "normal" people. Teens are often faced with a similar dilemma: family versus friends or one group of friends versus another. How would you manage these choices without alienating one group or the other?
7. "The morning clouds were thick toward the west. Blue and black, smeared with yellow, they made the sky look bruised and battered." (p. 45) There are beautiful descriptive passages throughout the novel. Read aloud your favorite of these lyrical passages and talk about why you find them so pleasing.
8. Throughout the novel, there are characters, events, and places that are symbols for ideas: the circus, the Cannibal King, the Oregon Trail, and the storm, to name a few. What does each of these metaphors represent?
9. Whenever Harold feels threatened, he closes his eyes tightly and chants silently to himself, "No one can see me, no one can hurt me. The words that they say cannot harm me." (p. 11) Harold's belief in his own invisibility defines his sense of being an

alien. Many teens share these feelings of being an outsider. How have you experienced these feelings? How do you deal with them?

10. At first Harold thinks Samuel is the ugliest thing he has ever seen. Yet when Harold stares into Samuel's eyes he sees something other than ugliness. Samuel and Tina carry the message that a person's self-worth is determined by what is inside, not by physical appearance. But every message from the media today seems to be that your physical appearance is the only important thing. Where do you stand on this issue? Talk about the instances in the novel where the sideshow performers show their goodness. In which instances in the novel do the "normal" people show their lack of humanity?

11. "Beware the ones with unnatural charm. And the beast that feeds with its tail. . . . A wild man's meek and a dark one's pale. And there comes a monstrous harm." (p. 60) This is one of Gypsy Magda's prophecies in the novel. What are some of the others? What do her prophecies mean? Do they come true?

12. We meet Tina, Samuel, and the other malformed sideshow performers when they are adults. What do you suppose it was like for them as teenagers? Did they view themselves as freaks? Did they have the same hopes and aspirations that you do? Do you think they would receive the same kind of treatment now as they did back then?

13. Harold is beset with loss. His father dies in World War II, and his brother is missing in action; he feels he has lost his mother to another man; he loses his dream romance with Flip, the bareback rider; he witnesses the death of Tina; and he even suffers from the lack of pigment in his skin. How does Harold deal with these losses? What losses have you had in your life? How did you cope with them?

14. When Harold first meets Tina, it is she who says to Harold, "Maybe you should come with us." (p. 16) Yet her dying words to him are "Go see your mama. Okay? . . . She'll miss you, kiddo." (p. 313) What does Tina know about what Harold needs?