

2023 One Book One Valley Discussion Guide
***The Bear*, by Andrew Krivak (New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2020)**

1. From the very first sentence, we're aware that this will be a novel that grapples with human extinction. How do the man and his daughter, described as "the last two," each view their place in their world and their relationship to human history?
2. Throughout the book, the main characters are called only "the man," "the girl," "her father," etc. Why do you think they remain unnamed? Similarly, why do you think there are almost no physical descriptions of the girl or her father?
3. The novel provides a great deal of authentic detail about gathering and preparing food, making clothing, and traveling and finding shelter in the wilderness. It seems almost to provide a physical survival guide. In what ways does it also serve as a spiritual survival guide?
4. Throughout the book, the girl and her father cherish a few familiar items from our current day and time. What kinds of meaning do they assign to these objects? Did this change your perspective on any of the everyday objects in your life?
5. In a world where very little exists from human civilization, a few books have survived. As the girl gets older, the man teaches her "about what had been and why it had been that way, from tales recounted in old words of an old time on old pieces of paper bound between cracked and fraying covers" (p. 33) – the histories and imaginings of those (including Virgil, Homer, H.D., Wendell Berry) who came before them. Much later, as the girl grows old, she uses the books—and other artifacts contained within her childhood home—as fuel for fire. Though she no longer reads poetry, she still listens for stories and verse in "the whispering of beeches and pine...the song of the gray catbird and the cry of the loon...the slow and susurrant voice of the trees" (p. 218). How do you understand the evolution of her awareness of communication in the world?
6. What might be the significance of the book's title, *The Bear*? How significant are some of the earlier mentions of bears? For instance, the girl asks her father, "Was my mother a bear?" (p. 35). At another point, in a story within the story, the father tells his daughter a fairy tale about a talking bear that saves a village.
7. Did your experience of the book change after the father's death, when the bear rescues the grieving girl (p. 103)? How does the girl's companionship with the bear compare with her earlier relationship with her father?
8. Why do you suppose Krivak chose never to explain the cataclysm that ended human life on earth? (How did this omission affect your experience of the book?) Did he give readers any clues? Does the book express (or imply) particular concerns about the nature of human civilization?
9. What can *The Bear* teach us about grief? Did any of the moments in the novel that speak to grief resonate with you?
10. Although *The Bear* is generally referred to as a novel, it seems to partake of many literary classifications. Do you see it as a coming-of-age story? a fable? utopian or dystopian narrative? a celebration of life or an elegy for its loss? a cautionary tale?

Andrew Krivak is the author of *The Bear* and the novels of the Dardan Trilogy, which include *The Sojourn*, a National Book Award finalist and winner of both the Chautauqua Prize and Dayton Literary Peace Prize; *The Signal Flame*, a Chautauqua Prize finalist; and *Like the Appearance of Horses* (Bellevue Literary Press, May 2023). He lives with his wife and three children in Somerville, Massachusetts, and Jaffrey, New Hampshire, in the shadow of Mount Monadnock, which inspired much of the landscape in *The Bear*.

Interviews with the author and source material can be found at www.blpress.org and www.andrewkrivak.com.

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