

Discussion Questions for *The Highest Tide* by Jim Lynch

1. A reviewer praised Lynch for his skill in using marine life as a "subtly executed metaphor for the bewilderment of adolescence." Is there anything to that?
2. In what ways does Miles seem older than his years? What particular observations or actions demonstrate his unusual level of maturity?
3. Miles narrates his own story of the summer he was 13, a summer in which he was "ambushed by science, fame and suggestions of the divine." What is the effect of Miles' narration and his occasional direct address to the reader throughout the novel? How does Miles' voice contribute to the reader's sense of his character as "real"?
4. How would you describe the relationship between Florence and Miles? Is she a surrogate mother? What does Florence offer that Miles' parents don't? What does Miles offer Florence?
5. When Miles tells Phelps all about Rachel Carson, including the fact that she was "brave and brilliant," Phelps tells him that he's in love with a spinster who's been dead for decades. What is the basis of the friendship between Miles and Phelps, and why are such conversations between the two (about sex and sea life, mainly) so funny?
6. Miles has overheard that his parents didn't really want to be parents and that he was a mistake. Why are his parents so incompatible? Why are they so oblivious to Miles and his interests? How does Miles cope with his parents?
7. When asked by a TV reporter why the giant squid might have ended up in the cove, Miles responds, "Maybe the earth is trying to tell us something." He then comments, "They liked that a lot. A kid says something like that, and people go ahhh. Offer a plausible explanation and they yawn. Dip into the mystical, especially if you appear to be an unsullied, clearheaded child, and they want to write a song about you." What do these very different insights - one about the earth, and one about people - tell us about Miles?
8. Miles has a knack for rescuing people and creatures: he tries to save the giant squid; he resuscitates Lizzie, a halfdrowned retriever; he rescues Phelps when he is stuck in the mud during an incoming tide; he rescues Florence daily with his visits; and he wants nothing more than to rescue Angie from her unhappiness. He also wants to rescue his parents' marriage, but that doesn't seem likely. And, he says, "I want to keep my bay, as I knew it, intact." How did such an unlikely boy become a conservator and rescuer?
9. Channel 7's story about "the remarkable Olympia boy" makes much of Miles' extraordinary gift for seeing what others don't see, like the invasive Chinese mitten crabs and invasive seaweed Caulerpa. Florence, too, is able to know what

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- other people can't know, as with her predictions of the earthquake and the tide. What does the novel seem to say about this ability to see or to know what other people can't? Is it a gift or a particular kind of attention?
10. According to Miles' mother, Angie Stegner has "gone public" with her craziness, which her father later tells Miles is bipolar disorder. This knowledge doesn't change Miles' feelings for Angie at all. What do his memories of Angie as his babysitter tell us about the basis of their bond? What is most interesting, or funny, about Miles' conversation with Angie in Chapter 12?
  11. Some of the explanations given for the strange events occurring in the Sound that summer are winds, weather, global warming and human actions. Miles says, "People lost interest once the explanations rolled in. Some even got angry, as if scientists were determined to squeeze the magic out of everything." Given people's desire to fix on the mystical explanations for environmental events rather than the rational ones, how likely does it seem that people will take responsibility for actions that have an environmental impact? How do the media, in the novel, feed this irrational response?
  12. Near the end of his story Miles says, "in the space of a summer I'd learned that everything was changing, including me. I grew six inches during the next ten months, then my voice dropped and tiny Miles O'Malley slipped away." How has Miles changed during the summer? How well has he dealt with such painful events as his parents' separation and Florence's death? How optimistic is Miles about his future?
  13. In the novel's final scene, Miles and Angie are in her canoe on the flood tide, and Miles again quotes from Rachel Carson: "For all at last return to the sea - to Oceanus, the ocean river, like the ever - flowing stream of time, the beginning and the end." Angie tells Miles that she and the sea will wait for him. In what ways is this scene symbolic? What possible interpretations does it suggest?
  14. Considering the sea life Miles observes on any given day - a giant squid, an organ-vomiting sea cucumber, horny phosphorescent worms, a scarred and battered ragfish, a giant sunflower star, moon jellies - does it seem true that we miss something exciting if we don't pay attention to the natural world? If there is a relationship between "science and suggestions of the divine" in the novel, how do they come together, or diverge?
  15. In his conversation with Carolyn, in front of a large audience, Miles quotes from Rachel Carson: "If there is poetry in my book about the sea it is not because I deliberately put it there but because no one could write truthfully about the sea and leave out poetry." Is Miles a poet as well, when he talks about the sea? Is he a natural teacher?
  16. Miles says, "most people realize the sea covers two thirds of the planet, but few take the time to understand even a gallon of it...Most people don't want to invest a

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moment contemplating something like that unless they happen to stroll low tide alone at night with a flashlight and watch life bubble, skitter and spit in the shallows. Then they'll have a hard time not thinking about the beginnings of life itself and of an earth without pavement, plastic or Man." In creating a character like Miles, does Lynch seek to make his readers think more like Miles and less like "most people"?

Discussion questions graciously provided by the Kent District Library, the Grand Rapids Public Library, the Sparta Township Library and the Cedar Springs Library

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