



A Reading Group Guide

About the Book

For Ryanna Stuart, her life with her dad and stepmom has always been structured, planned, and quiet. But this summer, she’s received a letter from her grandparents—grandparents neither she nor her dad have spoken to since her mom’s death—inviting her to stay with them at an old summer camp in the Poconos.

Ryanna wants to learn about her mom, so she accepts. She wants to uncover the mystery of why her father hasn’t spoken to her grandparents all these years. She’s even looking forward to a quiet summer by the lake. But what she finds are relatives—*so many* relatives! Aunts and uncles and cousins upon cousins—a motley, rambunctious crew of kids and eccentric, unconventional adults. People who have memories of her mom from when she was Ryanna’s age, clues to her past like a treasure map.

Over the course of one unforgettable summer, Ryanna discovers a whole new side of herself and that, sometimes, the last place you expected to be is the place where you really belong.

Discussion Questions

1. As *The Firefly Summer* opens, readers are introduced to Ryanna as she enters the room and declares, “I could tell something was wrong the second I came downstairs.” (Chapter one) In what ways is Ryanna’s ability to read her father’s behaviors indicative of her understanding that something unusual is happening? Based on what her dad shares, predict how this new plan for her summer might shake things up for her family and specifically for her.
2. As they chat, Ryanna asks her dad, ““Are you remembering to take your B-12?”” (Chapter one) Though this may seem an unusual question for a twelve-year-old to ask, why is caring for her father so important to Ryanna? How does the fact that it’s just been two of them for as long as she can remember likely impact her need to ensure that his wellness is a priority?
3. Ryanna tells readers, “Mostly what I loved was that a movie set was a tidy, orderly universe.” (Chapter one) What can we learn about her personality based on this statement? In what ways might her desire for an “orderly universe” be a challenging goal for a summer spent with strangers, specifically the Van Camps?
4. Ryanna learns that just like her, her mother was a fan of mystery novels. How does finding out about this shared interest with her mom make her feel? As the story progresses, what are some of the other ways she learns she’s similar to her mom?
5. While describing Ginger, her stepmother, Ryanna states, “She didn’t try to be my mom or take over my life. It was like she understood it had just been me and my dad for a long time, and she was going to ease in rather than barge in.” (Chapter one) Do you believe Ryanna is lucky to be in such a position with a stepparent? Why or why not?
6. Ryanna shares that despite her mother being one of five children, “My dad never talked about my mom’s family.” (Chapter one) What are some possible motivations for him to remain silent and keep her away from that side of her family? Do you believe it to be the right decision on his part to do so? Explain your answer.
7. After learning that her grandparents want her to come spend the summer with them, Ryanna is initially hesitant and tells her father and Ginger, ““The summer’s already started. We have a whole plan in place.”” (Chapter one) Despite her hesitance, what ultimately helps Ryanna decide she wants to go meet her mother’s family and spend the summer getting to know them? In your opinion, what are the greatest things she can gain from this opportunity?

8. After finding a photo that her grandparents sent of her mom at age twelve, Ryanna realizes that going to Pennsylvania this summer is suddenly all she wants. How does seeing this photograph of her mother at the same age as herself become a catalyst for Ryanna's change of heart?
9. Ryanna offers, "All my Miss Terry mysteries were neatly lined up—and it felt like they were scolding me. Because all this time, I had been living inside an *actual* mystery, and I hadn't even realized it, much less cracked the case." (Chapter one) As a mystery lover, why is it important that Ryanna uncovers two mysteries: why her father hasn't spoken to her grandparents for all these years and who her mother was as a young person? How might learning these things help Ryanna better understand herself and her family?
10. From what you've read about Ryanna early in the novel, what makes this opportunity important? What do you predict might be the biggest challenges? Based on textual examples—even though she's quick to doubt herself—are there any specific ways she proves she made the right choice?
11. *The Firefly Summer* is told from a first-person narrator perspective. How would the story be different if it was told by multiple narrators rather than just Ryanna? Do you think changing or limiting the point of view would make the story better or worse? Why?
12. Before Ryanna leaves for the camp, her father gives her a cell phone, money, and a credit card and tells her, "The phone is a privilege, and it's for emergencies only." (Chapter two) What do you believe her father is afraid will happen? How does being given these items by her dad make Ryanna feel? Have your parents ever offered you anything similar?
13. How does the Icee incident between Ryanna and her cousins Diya and Max at the PocoMart set the stage for how the summer might unfold? From your reading observations, how does Ryanna's ultimate willingness to participate in the family's camp initiation help turn things around?
14. Upon arrival at the camp, Ryanna quickly discovers that her aunts and uncles and cousins are a motley, rambunctious crew of kids and eccentric, unconventional adults who have collective memories of her mom they can offer her. What makes this connection to her family members precisely what Ryanna needs?

15. While his intentions are to be supportive, why does Ryanna's dad seem quick to offer her opportunities to speak to Dr. Wendy, her therapist? While therapy is important, can you think of ways she might be better supported by her father?
16. Based on your observations, describe each of Ryanna's family members. If you had the opportunity to meet her family, who do you think you'd like best and why?
17. As Ryanna discovers clues to her mother's childhood while she explores Camp Van Camp with her cousins over the summer, finding the treasure her mother has left behind becomes critical. Why is Ryanna so convinced her mother has left behind something incredibly important to be discovered?
18. Consider the relationships between Ryanna's cousins. What makes their bond special? In what ways do they support one another? What do you believe to be the biggest challenges to their relationships? Are there any ways in which you see similarities in these relationships with your extended family?
19. When Ryanna asks about her unusual name, her father tells her, "Your mom was stubborn. Once she wanted something, she was going to get it. She wanted to name her daughter Ryanna, and was firm on that. And by the time you came along, it just seemed like a given." (Chapter three) How does learning the history of her name and her mom's commitment to using it help Ryanna better understand her mother and who she was as a person? Thinking about yourself, does your name have a history or a particular tie to someone special?
20. What are some of the ways that Holden Andersen proves he is not like his father? How does Rick Andersen's poor behavior and unkind choices toward the Van Camps seem worse once the family discovers that their ancestors were previously best friends?
21. Based on what you learn through reading *The Firefly Summer*, who is the character you most identify with and for what reason? Of all the characters, who did you feel was most similar to you due to their personality or experiences?
22. By the novel's conclusion, what do you think are the most important ways Ryanna's life has been changed? What about the lives of her family members? Predict how things will be different for her moving forward.

Extension Activities

- **Design Your Own Treasure Map:** At the conclusion of *The Firefly Summer*, Ryanna finally puts together the clues that lead her to her mother’s buried treasure. Consider the items her mother has buried: Why do they have enough significance to her to be left as a treasure? Next, think about the things you hold most dear. After taking time to reflect, make a list of treasures you’d hide to preserve or protect them.

Next, use the steps offered by National Geographic Kids found here to make a treasure map of your own: <https://www.natgeokids.com/uk/home-is-good/how-to-make-treasure-map/>

For added fun, gather some “treasures,” and bury them. After doing so, exchange maps with friends and go on a treasure hunt!

- **Sleepaway Camps:** As Ryanna joins her mother’s family for their final summer at Camp Van Camp, she learns more about what life can be like at sleepaway camps. Begin by asking readers if any of them have been to a sleepaway camp, and if so, were any of their experiences like those in the novel? Next, have readers research the summer sleepaway camps in their area to discover the following:
 - When was it established?
 - How many campers does it have annually?
 - How long are camp sessions?
 - What are some of the activities that are advertised?
 - Is the camp co-ed?

After they gather this info, have readers share what they learned with their peers.

- **Ships in Glass Bottles:** Toward the end of *The Firefly Summer*, Ryanna and Holden search his father’s ship collection in hopes of finding the missing deed to the Van Camp land sold to the Van Camps by Holden’s grandfather. As a group, watch the following “How To” video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=33ihECpRQ-c>
After watching the brief video, use the following Wiki-How to allow readers to create their own ship in a bottle: <https://www.wikihow.com/Build-a-Ship-in-a-Bottle>

- **S'mores Night:** Coming together over a bonfire to feast on s'mores is a family tradition of the Van Camps with each family member having their own favorite way of preparing their s'mores. Using the s'mores creation suggestions offered to Ryanna by her family, gather a variety of s'mores ingredients and celebrate your reading of *The Firefly Summer* by toasting s'mores (with supervision) and hosting a book discussion. If a trip to the great outdoors isn't available, move your party inside and use microwave or oven prep tips offered online, and follow these science-based campfire chocolate s'mores tips, offered here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zYPoQIWqodQ>
- **Gather a Bird Herd!** From her grandmother, Ryanna learns that incredible bird species can be discovered and watched with some time, patience, and outdoor observation. For novices, use the various tips and activities offered to young people learning to bird by the Audubon Society here: <https://www.audubon.org/news/easy-ways-get-kids-birding>. Next, take these tips and go on a bird-spotting tour in your neighborhood or at a local park. As an activity add-on, consider doing some research in advance to discover what types of birds are regularly seen locally, so a "Spot the _" game can be crafted.
- **Create Your Own Game:** In *The Firefly Summer*, besides playing kickball, holding water races, and building sandcastles, Ryanna and her cousins create original games like ActionBall and AquaBall for the family to play. Using their creative ideas as inspiration, design a game of your own, being sure to name your game and write out the rules. Remember, games can be created for both indoor and outdoor play, and they don't have to be limited to equipment or cards. After designing your game, gather players and give it a test run!

This guide was created by Dr. Rose Brock. Rose is an associate professor in the Library Science Department in the College of Education at Sam Houston State University and holds a Ph.D. in Library Science, specializing in children's and young adult literature.

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