



The Eyes and the Impossible by Dave Eggers

Look inside for

Discussion Questions

Author Interview/Biography

Reviews

Discussion Questions

1. Let's revisit the concept of freedom. What does freedom mean in this book? How and where does Johannes describe the feeling of being free? Is there any reference to lack of freedom? What words are used to describe this? What are some challenges to freedom *in The Eyes & the Impossible*? How has your understanding of freedom (or lack of freedom) changed or expanded?

2. Reread the very first page of this book. It begins: “This is a work of fiction,” and then cautions readers against assuming that “all living things, animals in particular, are simply corollaries to humans.” What does this mean? Do you agree or disagree? Is fiction, particularly animal fiction, only make-believe?

3. This story is told in the first person. As readers, we experience the plot, observe the behavior of the other characters, and learn about the world they are in entirely from Johannes’s perspective. Why do you think Dave Eggers decided to tell this story from Johannes’s perspective?

4. In reviewing this book, the Wall Street Journal referred to Johannes as “appealing hero.” What makes him appealing? How is he a hero? Are there other heroes in this book?

5. This book features some important and serious topics, such as loyalty, the value of friendship, remaining committed to a plan, and the fear of being leashed or caged. But the author also uses a lot of humor. Find some humorous places in this book. What makes them funny? What do you think was the purpose of the humor?

6. In addition to humor, *The Eyes & the Impossible* also includes tension where worrisome events or situations occur. Where is there tension in this story? Choose a specific incident that felt tense. What was happening? How did the characters feel? How did you feel? Why do you think this scene was in the book?

7. In addition to character names, the author occasionally capitalizes other nouns, such as Bison (but not seagulls or goats or squirrels). He also capitalized nouns such as Sun, Parks People, Concerteers, and Campers. And he created proper nouns for specific roles: Eyes, Keepers of the Equilibrium. Why do you think he did this?

8. In chapter 35, we read about the final stage of the plan to liberate the Bison. Everything is ready until Freya says, “We can’t. . . . We can’t go on that ship.” An emotional Johannes thinks his plan has failed. What do you think? Was the plan a failure? What do the Bison think?

Retrieved from https://images.penguinrandomhouse.com/promo_image/9781524764203_10052.pdf

Author Interview

How did you approach writing this book differently than you might a book for adults?

I actually didn’t approach this project any differently than writing for adults. As I was writing, I thought, “I’m just going to write this exactly as I think it should be written, and not really worry about the audience.” I was so ready to write freely, without having to check facts, or write about technology—just writing from a much more untethered place. I guess the freedom expressed in the book, or that [the protagonist] Johannes feels, is very much the freedom I was feeling as a writer. But you know, Johannes

is a young dog and there are certain things that come through his perspective that resonate with a younger reader.

For the McSweeney's edition [which has a special wood-bound cover], we're sending the message that the book is for all ages. I know that for the Knopf Books for Young Readers version, it's children's middle grade. And I totally understand those kinds of designations from a publisher's perspective and a librarian's perspective. I just personally love the all-ages designation. I tend to resist genre and age group designations. I *really* resist critical designations of this or that literary movement.

I'm hoping that anybody would feel welcome to this book. All of these designations hamper what should be the pleasure of just picking up any book that looks intriguing to you.

Are there any particular writers who are categorized as "children's book authors" who you particularly enjoy?

There are so many authors, whether it's Jason Reynolds or Katherine Applegate, or Kate DiCamillo, who I got to read with my kids, and enjoyed just as much as they did.

Especially when I discovered Kate DiCamillo's books when my kids were little. I thought, these are classics, and the writing is so pure and perfect. She became one of my favorite writers. And yet, there are probably some adults who say, "Oh, those types of books aren't for me," even though they would benefit greatly from the pure reading pleasure of those books.

The author's note in the beginning of the book cautions readers against anthropomorphizing the animals. Why was that important to you to emphasize?

I wanted to free the reader from misinterpretation and to help them be able to take the story at face value. The park in the book is not Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, but I was inspired by it. And the bison who are kept there—I never took those bison as anyone but unfortunate creatures stuck in the pen in the park. They don't symbolize anything else to me. As humans, we do tend to think it's all about us, and I wanted to caution the reader against that.

We got cats during Covid. I had written most of the book at that point, but I was revising and polishing it, and I was just thinking about how we have these two cats, and they're related, but they're different in every conceivable way. Every single tendency is different from one to the other, and everything about them is so specific and complicated. But we don't assume that level of complexity about animals, that they could have their own sense of soulfulness and spirituality.

And this is so key to Johannes; he becomes hypnotized again and again by his first exposure to art, and it gets him in a lot of trouble. And so allowing that dog to have that kind of exaltation in freedom and beauty was crucial to the voice, and to the book in general. I mean, if nothing else, that's really what the book is about.

Had you been thinking more about themes of animal liberation when you began writing it?

I remember in my 20s, so this was like 1994, I went on my first horseback riding trip in Idaho, at a dude ranch. We were just going slowly up the hill on a hot day, and moving the exact speed that we could

have walked ourselves. But instead, we're sitting on a horse who is sweating profusely and biting my leg every couple of minutes. The horse was so pissed off about the whole project, and I'm looking at him in the eyes and thinking, "I don't need to ride you. We're not moving any faster. I'm just three feet higher than I would be if I were walking on my own."

And the whole project was so absurd, for everybody. That was my first time thinking about how this animal really has a mind of his own. And so, I have pretty strong opinions about animal freedom. But I'm full of contradictions, too. I'm not a vegan. I wish I were.

I think in the case of the bison at Golden Gate Park who inspired the bison characters in this book, having seen them now for 30 years, I never had a sense that they were living their best life right there. And Johannes is always sort of contrasting his life with the animals he sees who are kept.

I think that I am kind of a purist when it comes to freedom. It really has to be unmitigated. I would never preach to anybody about how to keep a pet or anything. All I know is that there is something really special when your cats come back to you every night because they *want* to sleep inside and they like your companionship and food—but during the day they're gone, and they have totally independent lives. It just feels like that's probably the best arrangement; the one that feels most in balance, and most fair.

This is not a political book, but I do think I tried to channel what it might feel like—the contrast between an animal in captivity and an animal who owes nothing to anybody, and is utterly free.

Retrieved from <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-authors/article/92190-q-a-with-dave-eggers.html>

Author Biography

Dave Eggers is the author of many books, among them *The Eyes and the Impossible*, *The Circle*, *The Monk of Mokha*, *Heroes of the Frontier*, *A Hologram for the King*, and *What Is the What*.

He is the founder of McSweeney's, an independent publishing company, and co-founder of 826 Valencia, a youth writing center that has inspired over 70 similar organizations worldwide.

Eggers is winner of the American Book Award, the Muhammad Ali Humanitarian Award for Education, the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, the TED Prize, and has been a finalist for the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. He is the 2024 John Newbery Medalist, for the most distinguished contribution to children's literature for *The Eyes and the Impossible*. Eggers is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Retrieved from: <https://daveeggers.net/dave-eggers>