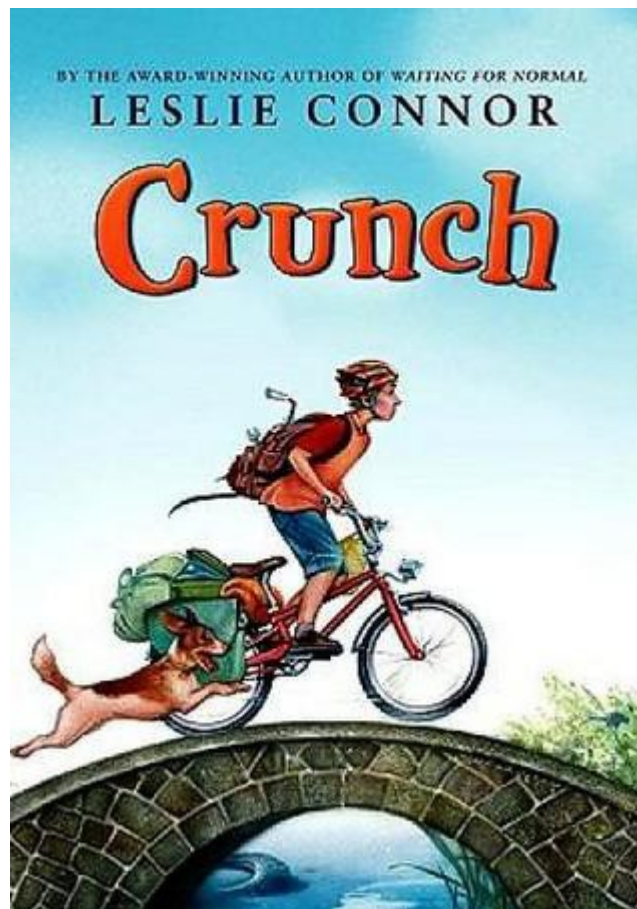


Literature Guide for Leslie Connor's
Crunch



by Robin M. Huntley

Summary

Set in a time that is an ambiguous (yet scarily small) number of years in the future, Crunch tells the story of a family and a community dealing with life in a world where gasoline has ceased to remain available. Featuring protagonist Dewey Marris, a 14-going-on-30-year-old bicycle mechanic, the story highlights some of the uncomfortable realities of a world suddenly without gasoline without delving deep into the true societal disintegration that would likely take place should such a thing truly happen. Author Leslie Connor's gentle depiction of a community frantically striving to achieve self-sufficiency by any means matches the worldview and developmental stage of 10- to 14-year-olds perfectly, and beautifully intertwines the themes of independence, ingenuity, and responsibility with an examination of a world in which fuel has ceased to be available.

Taking place within a small coastal community that could easily be somewhere along Massachusetts' North Shore, Crunch begins just as the fuel has run dry. Dewey and his four siblings have been left at home alone while their parents take an anniversary trek, an annual event that puts both of them within their mobile family business: a box truck that makes deliveries along the Atlantic coast from their maybe-Massachusetts home to the furthest reaches of Downeast Maine. The Marris siblings find themselves stuck, like everyone else, in a bit of a crunch when the gas runs out, as their stint as a parent-less (yet self-sufficient) family grows from a few days to an undefined period of time with no end in sight.

Luckily for the Marris, their secondary family business booms as soon as the fuel runs out. With cars ceasing to be an option for transportation, local folks turn to bicycle transportation – and many find that their chains are rusty, their gears won't shift, and their brakes are worn out. Dewey and his brother Vince have more business than they ever dreamed of at the family Bike Barn, and though they look forward to their parents' eventual return, they revel in their success and gain confidence from their success. The longer the gas is dry, however, the busier the Bike Barn becomes. Before the brothers know it, their business is nearly out-of-control busy, and their clients become shorter on

patience.

During the hours when the boys aren't busy fixing bikes and making runs for extra parts, they're busy caring for their family's small menagerie of farm animals as well as their other siblings – both older and younger. And amidst the semi-controlled chaos of the crunch, things begin to go mysteriously missing – both at the Marriss Bike Barn and around town. First it's bike parts in the shop (perhaps simply misplaced?), then it's bikes stolen from the beach. Next it's bicycles from a police impound lot, cash from the Bike Barn's stash, and eggs from their hen house. Nearly dizzy from the stressful pace of his days as mechanic, caregiver, and provider, Dewey can't decide if he's truly missing things or if it's the result of his own disorganization, but eventually, the clues stack up against an unsuspected thief.

Critical Thinking Questions

These Critical Thinking Questions are intended to help readers process and reflect on what they have read. The questions focus little on the who, what, when, where, and why of the story, and are centered around the portions of the story that meant to make readers think deeply and relate Katya's experiences to their own lives. The questions are listed in an order that follows the chronology of the story, but many of the questions can be considered again and again throughout the book as further information is divulged.

- The book opens with Dewey describing his imagined image of a gas worker peering into a pipe run dry. Could this be a metaphor? What could it represent?
- Throughout the story, Dewey is eager to take on responsibility, but Vince seems more reluctant. Why do you think this is? What do you know about Vince's personality that could explain this?
- In what ways do the Marriss children take care of each other? Consider both the tangible

things that they do for each other and the ways in which they care for each others' emotions.

- In what ways does the community in which the Marrisses live take care of them? Why do you think that community members are so eager and willing to give them support?
- How would you feel if you were in Dewey's situation?
- How do you think Dewey's parents feeling while they are stuck in Maine? How do you think they would cope with these feelings?
- The adults with whom Dewey does business treat him (generally) with respect. What qualities do you think Dewey shows that grant him this respect?
- Dewey and Vince do not pay themselves for working at the Bike Barn. Why do you think this is?
- What could the piece of art that Lil creates represent? Why do you think she felt compelled to create it?
- The story is told from Dewey's perspective. How do you think key events would be interpreted through another character's perspective?
- The Marris family seems fairly well-prepared for a situation like the crunch. Do you think this was intentional? Why or why not? What about their family culture makes you think this?

Mini-Lesson

As one of the Critical Thinking Questions points out, the story is told through Dewey's perspective, but would sound different if told through the perspective of another character. Consideration of the perspective from which each character might tell their story can help readers to better understand the characters themselves, and can help to highlight the reasons for their words, actions, and thoughts.

In this lesson, readers are asked to identify characteristics about each character that could help to define their perspective on their events that take place in the story, as well as the way in which they view the world. Once readers have identified these things, they can choose a moment in the story to re-imagine and re-write from the perspective of one (or many) of the story's non-narrative characters. In doing so, readers will gain a more well-rounded understanding of the events that take place in Crunch, as well as the unique family dynamics found amongst the Marrisses.

Shifting Perspectives

1. Begin by discussing the meaning of the word “perspective” with readers. Address the word's dictionary definition, as well as its meaning within readers' everyday lives and its meaning within the realm of literature. Ask readers to generate ways in which their own perspective determines the way that they understand and remember an event.
2. Explain to readers that in order to better understand the many characters within the story, they'll be considering the unique perspective that each holds and will work to re-tell portions of the story from another character's perspective.
3. Ask readers to generate a list of significant characters within the story. This list will likely include members of the Marriss family, their close friends and neighbors, and members of the local police force.
4. Using a chart (structure is readers' choice), readers should identify important traits that each character has. Additionally, readers should keep track of characters' age and can make guesses about the developmental stage that each character may be in so as to better understand their outlook on the world.
5. Ask readers to discuss (verbally or in writing) the worldview of one important character. They should consider how the character thinks, acts, and views the world, supporting their statements about these things with evidence from the story.

6. Allow readers to choose an important moment in the story in which both Dewey and their chosen character are present. Allow them to describe the moment from Dewey's perspective.
7. Ask readers to consider how their chosen character might have interpreted and described the situation, keeping in mind the worldview that they described in step 5. Would their character agree with Dewey's description of the moment? Would they share the same feelings, or have different emotions? What would their thought process and internal monologue sound like? Answers to all of these questions can help support the development of a re-telling (verbal or written) of the chosen moment.
8. *(Optional)* Readers may choose to consider another character and re-write another moment from the story. A second (or third, or fourth, etc.) re-write of a moment is most useful if the chosen moment involves numerous characters; that way, readers can consider multiple perspectives on the same moment.

Extension Activities

Each of the following activity suggestions are designed to support readers in not only deepening their understanding of this particular story, but in strengthening their skills in reading comprehension and writing, as well. Loosely written so as to allow for adaptability, the activities have been designed with readers ages 10-14 in mind.

Mapping Community

What would happen in your own community if gasoline were no longer available? Readers can consider this question while creating a map of their community that details the places they frequent that are within biking distance. With gas gone, cars would no longer be an option – greatly decreasing the places and spaces that are accessible within a community. Readers can think about the places that they currently frequent, then consider not only whether or not they are within a bike-able distance, but

whether they would be able to remain open for very long after the beginning of a fuel crunch. Create a map that details bike-friendly routes to all of the places you frequent, and mark each place with an estimate of the amount of time that it would be able to remain open without access to fuel.

Planning for Self-Sufficiency

In the story, the Marris family relies heavily on their own self-sufficiency skills (and resources, like farm animals) and the food produced by local farms. Would you have the same success in survival during a crunch as the Marris family? Make a list of all of the self-sufficiency skills that you have that do not rely on gasoline. Then, create a list of the things that you could easily obtain from local producers. Would these things be enough to sustain you? What about your family? What skills would you need to develop or improve upon in order to exist comfortably in the absence of gasoline? What resources would you need to have at home in order to support you? Considering these things does not mean making a plan for the apocalypse; it means detailing the ways in which you might become more self-sustaining or more reliant on local resources.

Bike Mechanics

Dewey and Vince spend much of the story working in the Bike Barn, and Dewey shares lots of information on how bicycles work and the parts that make them go. So how do bikes actually work? Go find out! Look at a bicycle, read a book, watch a video, take something apart! Use all of the resources available to you to find out how bicycles are put together and what makes them go.

Barter Values

Once gasoline is gone, folks become short on cash. Often in this type of situation, barter is made, creating a trade-based economy rather than a money-based one. Think about the trades and barter that the Marris family make; what things would you be willing to use to barter with? What trades

could you make? Create a plan for functioning within a money-free economy by listing items for barter or skills to trade with, then determine what you would be willing to barter or trade each one for – thus creating a system of non-monetary values upon which a trade-based economy could be built!

Doing Without

Once the crunch begins, the Marrisses find themselves without some of their usual things – bread, for example, goes sorely missed due to the lack of baking skills amongst the children. Other things, like grains and crackers, are bought in mass quantities early on so as to avoid running out later on. Items like these are transported around the globe thanks to gasoline – so what would happen if they could no longer travel? Find out where the items that you depend on come from, and how they get to your home. Make a list of things that you'd likely have to do without entirely during a crunch, and then make a secondary list of things that you'd make a point to quickly buy up if a crunch began. Researching the origin and method of travel of some of the goods that you use every day can not help to build an understanding of your global footprint.