ALL RISE FOR THE HONORABLE PERRY T. COOK

"A deeply moving, even inspiring novel."
—Newbery Honor–winning author Gary D. Schmidt
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Discussion Questions

1. Perry thinks of the residents of Blue River as family. Does someone have to be related to be a family member? What makes a family?

2. Mr. VanLeer thinks it is wrong of the Warden to allow Perry to stay at Blue River. Should Perry have been raised by a foster family instead? Why?

3. Why do you think Brian’s attitude towards Perry changes? Do you think it was realistic? Can people change?

4. One of Big Ed’s mottos for residents is “Eye on the end.” What’s one of your personal goals right now? What are you doing to make it happen?

5. What is your “Win-Win” for today? What has gone well in your day? What have you done to help someone else?

6. Do you think Perry did the right thing by hiding Mr. VanLeer’s award? Why or why not? Can you think of any examples from real life of doing something that might be wrong in order to bring out the truth or make things better?

7. Perry points out that Jessica and Mr. VanLeer might have more in common than they think. In what ways are they alike or different? Which character seemed like a better person? Why?

8. Jessica says that being a neighbor means feeding someone’s dog while they’re away, even if you’re mad at them. What do you think it means to be a good neighbor? Can you think of a time when you did something nice for someone you didn’t particularly like?

Interview with Leslie Connor

Leslie Connor is the author of several award-winning books for children, and her latest, ALL RISE FOR THE HONORABLE PERRY T. COOK, should feel right at home among them. It’s the story of Perry T. Cook, an 11-year-old who was raised by his mom at the Blue River Co-ed Correctional, until a new district attorney forces him into foster care. Desperate to be reunited with his mom, Perry goes on a quest for answers about her past crime…and discovers that love makes people resilient, no matter where they come from. Here, Leslie answers questions from Kidsreads.com’s Margret Wiggins, like what inspired her to tell Perry’s story, which authors she loved to read as a kid, and the exciting new book she’s working on now!

Kidsreads.com: What inspired you to write ALL RISE FOR THE HONORABLE PERRY T. COOK? Why did you think it was important to tell this story?

Leslie Connor: The seed idea first sprang from an article in the New York Times about an inmate at Bedford Hills. The issue of being an effective parent from behind bars was a small part of the story, but it was the part that drew me in. I started to think about the child.

KRC: You chose to write ALL RISE FOR THE HONORABLE PERRY T. COOK from both Perry’s and Jessica’s perspectives. Was it challenging to switch between such different voices?

LC: Not so hard! That happened naturally. This is Perry’s story, but there was a rhythm that let me know when it was time to loop back to Jessica. Her chapters are short but important; I wanted that juxtaposition of life on the “outside” with life on the “inside.”

KRC: What is the hardest part of getting into the mindset of an 11-year-old boy?

LC: To really know the mindset of any character I ask myself again and again: What is this person’s truth? There are layers to this, and it is the part I feel I must get right. I don’t think about gender as much as I think about the individual.

KRC: What kind of research did you do to write this book? Did you conduct interviews or visit a correctional facility?

LC: A deep well of information came from news articles, TED talks, documentaries, prison blogs, interviews, case accounts and image searches. An inmate orientation handbook proved surprisingly useful. I also “toured” facilities online, and I took myself “driving” on the roads of Butler County in Nebraska via Google maps.

KRC: This book deals with some adult issues, like correctional facilities, parole and crime. Why did you think it was important to discuss these issues from the point of view of a middle schooler?

LC: Unfortunately, it is a part of their world. One in 28 school-aged children has a parent in prison --- a shocking statistic. I hope Perry’s voice will be an accessible medium that inspires comfort, empathy, understanding and forgiveness.
KRC: The theme of home is constant throughout ALL RISE FOR THE HONORABLE PERRY T. COOK. What is one of your favorite things about your own home?

LC: Hmm...I like the smallness of my home! In fact, I’ve always liked small spaces, from alcoves, to tents, to garden sheds. (However, a prison cell would not charm me.) My favorite room here is the screen porch --- the outdoor room.

KRC: Perry and his friend Zoey spend a lot of time in the library. Did you like to hang out in the library when you were growing up?

LC: My hometown library was in a crooked little old house down in the village. I didn’t get to spend endless hours there because it wasn’t within walking distance. But one afternoon, I sat on a stepstool between the shelves and read the first chapter of MISS HAPPINESS AND MISS FLOWER by Rumor Godden. Then I took it home.

KRC: What were some of your favorite authors or books growing up?

LC: I adored the Little House books by Laura Ingalls Wilder. I read them over and over again. I also loved E.B. White, Hans Christian Andersen, Maj Lindman, Bill Peet, Robert McCloskey and Beverly Cleary.

KRC: You’ve written a range of books, from picture books to middle grade and YA. Do you have a similar writing process for each age group, or are there some major differences? Do you have a favorite age group to write for?

LC: Right now, I’m most at home writing for middle grade and tween readers. I always begin with a situation. Then a character shows up and gives the writing voice, and that informs the genre. It’s hard for me to change what I hear in my ear, so I usually let it lead me!

KRC: What advice would you give to a kid like Perry or Zoey, someone who feels different and a little bit like an outsider?

LC: I’d say, good for you! You have a unique vantage point; you can keep your eye on the world. You also have the opportunity to be inclusive. Outsiders have a magical way of finding each other. Then guess what? We don’t feel like outsiders any more.

KRC: Each Blue River resident has their own distinct voice. Was there one character that was the most fun to write?

LC: Sashonna was great fun for me. I could hear and see her wandering in the periphery of my little mental movie. All the residents of Blue River came from my imagination, but I’m certain that my research contributes to their authenticity.

KRC: Are you working on another book now? Can you tell us anything about it?

LC: Yes! My new main character is 12-year-old Mason. He’s an academic underdog, as earnest as the day is long. He’s grieving an enormous loss, and he hasn’t quite figured out that he’s under a net of suspicion. His heart is big. He loves apples.

https://www.kidsreads.com/authors/leslie-connor/news/interview-021816
Leslie Connor FAQs

Where do you get story ideas?
From every-day life! My stories usually begin with a situation—something I have seen for myself, heard about, or read about. Eventually, a character turns up—almost like he or she is talking in my ear. I find out what that character cares about. Then the scenes of the story run like a little mental movie.

Are your characters based on family members or people you know?
No…or at least not exactly. All my characters are composites of people I know, or have heard about or read about, or can imagine. They are invented, but they become amazingly real to me.

How long does it take for you to write a novel?
The first draft usually takes me about a year. I spend a long, long time thinking about the story first. (I start an envelope for each idea, where I collect scribbled passages, snippets of dialog, research notes, museum brochures, maps, and photographs.) After a manuscript is accepted I work with my editor through several revisions. That can take six weeks for some projects, and as much as a year for others.

What's your writing process like?
Messy! I tend to write out of order. (I don’t recommend this to others but I accept that this is the way I work best.) If I am not sure what comes next, I go ahead and write a scene I know will come later. It’s better for me to keep working; the more time I spend with the project, the more the answers come.

Do you have advice for young creative writers?
Yes! (This is for every writer!) Make time for daydreaming. The writer’s mind craves it! Let scenes run in your imagination. Watch your little mental movies. It’s much easier to write something that you have visualized.

http://www.leslieconnor.com/faqs/