# Table of Contents

Discussion Questions 3
Interview With Ali Benjamin 4
Author FAQ 10
Discussion Questions

What did you think of the way Suzy reacted upon first hearing the news of Franny's death? Were you expecting this type of reaction?

Franny and Suzy's relationship had been changing as they got older. What do you think would have happened to their relationship if Franny hadn't died? Do you think they could have repaired their friendship? Do you think they could have been friends the way they had been when they were younger?

Suzy was silent for a majority of the book. What do you think were her reasons for doing so? Were there other factors that you think contributed to her not wanting to speak? What was the significance of her not speaking?

Suzy is not purely victim and not purely bully. Why do you think the author chose to portray her that way? Do you think Suzy’s method of "sending a message" to Franny (because of her acting like the pretty girls) was called for? Was it effective?

Science is a strong theme in the book. Why do you think the author chose to structure her book according to the scientific method? What other ways is science important in this story?

"Sometimes bad things just happen." Do you think this is a good explanation for why Fanny died? If you were Suzy’s mother, do you think there’s another way you could have put it to allay Suzy’s frantic search for the truth?

What was Suzy hoping to gain by proving that Irukandji were the cause of Franny's death?

The typically accepted stages of grief are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Did you see any of these stages in Suzy’s story?
**Interview With Ali Benjamin**

Interviewed by Tim Manley

I’d like to say I read *The Thing About Jellyfish* in an aquarium, but I read it on my couch. Still, along the way I loaded up YouTube videos of jellyfish and scientists referenced in the book. I watched the same clips our protagonist watched. I felt the same fascination and fear — What are these things?

Suzy Swanson of Ali Benjamin’s *The Thing About Jellyfish* hasn’t spoken since the death of her one-time best friend, Franny Jackson. Suzy is dually haunted by the mystery of Franny’s death — drowning in the ocean while on vacation — and by the things that were left unsaid before she died. This grief becomes energized by Suzy’s newfound obsession with jellyfish, otherworldly and sometimes deadly creatures that may hold a secret behind Franny’s death as well as the future of the planet. Suzy’s investigation into jellyfish is nothing less than an investigation into how we make sense of the incomprehensible.

This is Ali Benjamin’s first novel, and first book for young readers. She mixes the painful reality of middle school social life with the true magic of nature to allow for a story that is both deep and buoyant. It’s a thing of beauty, much like the organisms from which it draws inspiration.

**Tim Manley:** Like our protagonist, you became interested in jellyfish after a trip to the New England Aquarium. What about them initially fascinated you?

I realized that there were people in the world who spend their whole adult lives researching jellies. That’s when a thought popped into my head, almost like a cartoon thought bubble appearing over me: Ali, you’ve done everything wrong. At that instant, those jellyfish researchers seemed like the luckiest humans on Earth.

**Ali Benjamin:** It was a weekday; the aquarium was jam-packed with school groups. It was chaotic and loud. I wandered into the Jellies exhibit for the same reason that Suzy, my main character does at the start of *The Thing About Jellyfish*, I was hoping for some peace and quiet, a break from the noise.
Something happened when I was down there. I’d been aware of jellies my whole life, of course -
- I remember panicking at the beach when I was young after noticing some in the water -- but I’d
never really seen them. I’d never watched them move, or looked at their colors, or bothered to
wonder about them. Now, staring into the tanks, I realized that they’re gorgeous. That’s the first
thing that caught my attention: their beauty. But they weren’t just beautiful, they were also alien
and menacing and creepy as heck.

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jellies. That’s when a thought popped into my head, almost like a cartoon thought bubble
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researchers seemed like the luckiest humans on Earth.

I’ve had a few experiences like this; it reminds me of that Jonathan Safran Foer line
from Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, “Sometimes I feel my bones straining under the
weight of all the lives I’m not living.” I think this book [The Thing About Jellyfish] was a way of
straining a little less, of living another life for a while.

**TM:** Suzy has not spoken since the death of her former best friend, Franny. At one point,
Suzy says there is “a gulf between what was inside me and what I was putting out.” At
another, Suzy speaks of a positive silence she shared with Justin, the “best kind of
silence, the not-talking kind of silence.” What is the value of staying quiet, and when is it
correct to speak?

**AB:** I used to be terrible at small talk, and I marveled at people who did it well, and seemingly
effortlessly. I’ve gotten more skilled at small talk as I’ve gotten older, but I’ve also had
experiences that changed my perspective on it altogether. My husband and I lived in West
Africa after we got married. There, neighbors often stopped by our house for evening visits.
While there were always customary greetings — how’s the health, how’s the family? — our
West African friends didn’t feel the need to fill up every silence. Often, they were content to sit
quietly with us for long spells — five minutes of silence, ten minutes, maybe more.
After a while, the silences began to feel less awkward. Then, after quite a bit of time, I learned to relax into them. There was something so comforting, so intimate, about being together without words. If one of us felt compelled to say something, we could...but we weren’t required to.

There’s so little silence in our culture. Maybe that’s always been true, but it’s especially true today. Even when we’re alone, we’re never really alone with our thoughts — there’s always a text, or Instagram, or Facebook, or Netflix, or something — to fill up the empty space.

I can’t say with any certainty when it’s right to speak, or to be silent. I can’t even say specifically what one gets from not-speaking. But I do feel certain that most of us could use more silence than we have access to — that there are things we can’t hear, important things about ourselves and our connection to the world, when words are in the way.

**TM:** The Thing About Jellyfish portrays not only the pain of receiving cruelty from others, but the more complicated pain of employing cruelty on others. What do you see as the motivation behind these choices? Why do you think we all contribute to making middle school so awful?

Most of us aren’t all good, or all bad; we’re a big, chaotic jumble. We have moments of kindness, but we also rack up our fair share of regrets. Sometimes we get so wrapped up tending to our own hurts that we cannot see the hurt we inflict on others.

To me, that’s where the juice is; that’s the stuff that’s worth exploring. And ultimately, I think it means much more to see a complex character choose hope, or move toward some deeper humanity.

**AB:** It was important to me to blur the line between hero and villain, between victim and bully. Some readers have reacted strongly to that, observing that Suzy is a poor role model for kids. I suppose in some ways, that’s true. For all her strengths, Suzy does some thoughtless things, and even a couple of cruel things. But I’ve never been particularly interested in stories where one character, or set of characters, is all good while others are all bad. Nor do I think that kind of dichotomy is useful — especially to kids. Most of us aren’t all good, or all bad; we’re a big, chaotic jumble. We have moments of kindness, but we also rack up our fair share of regrets.
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I recently read through my middle school diary; I was so eager when I opened it after all these years but was promptly disappointed by my middle school self. I had always thought of myself as a generally nice kid, even in the throes of adolescence. But throughout my diary, I was snarky about other kids, and sometimes I was downright nasty. Practically all I talked about was boys and the pursuit of popularity and boys. Reading this diary is the strangest experience; I recognize the handwriting as my own, and I recognize the events I described. But the words on the page are inconsistent with how I imagined myself at the time. I remember feeling like a misfit. I remember feeling like other kids were rude, or mean, or dismissive. I remember feeling like I was outside looking in. It turns out that I was just as awful as anyone else.

I’m fairly certain that I was being defensive; by excluding others, I was somehow reassuring myself that my place was on the inside, not the outside. But I suspect there’s also this: in some essential way, I didn’t believe that what I did mattered.

**TM:** In addition to being organized into sections according to the scientific method — Hypothesis, Methods, etc. — the novel also features a great number of facts and allusions to specific science books and videos. Were most of these already waiting in your head, or did you have to research for scientific facts that felt relevant?

**AB:** The only facts I remember actively seeking were from the earliest flashbacks — like the fact that rabbits’ teeth never stop growing. In those chapters, I wanted some facts and ideas that a very young child would have had at her disposal.

All of the other scientific facts had been banging around the back of my brain for a while, waiting for some outlet. That said, I have a terrible mind for details, and my grasp on precise facts and figures can get hazy — I remember the gist, but not the specifics. So I did have to look them
each again, just to make sure the facts were accurate (and even then, we hired a terrific fact-checker before the book went to copyediting).

**TM:** Your first two books were nonfiction narratives. You’ve spoken of the challenges of writing fiction, where there are an endless number of plot moves to choose from. What can fiction do that a true story cannot?

When I started writing this book, I actually thought I was writing nonfiction, but then something else took over.

**AB:** This is such a good question, and it’s one I’ve been thinking about quite a bit. It’s tempting to say that when done right, non-fiction can do everything fiction can do. But then why, with so many great true stories to be told, do these fictional stories keep bubbling up inside of us? Why are we compelled to write them, to tell them, to read and re-read them? I think it’s got something to do with the unconscious, with the way our brains take all kinds of different input — images and memories and ideas and longings and fears — then combine them in new ways.

Nonfiction feels to me a little like that driving test where you must maneuver the car through a series of orange cones. The cones are the facts of the situation — the truth, or as close to it as one person can get. You’d better not knock them down. So those cones are always in your mind, you’re always navigating around them. Fiction is the opposite — for it to work well, you’ve got to forget about all those external things and let the unconscious part of your brain take over. For me, that’s really hard. But when it works, it’s fascinating.

When I started writing this book, I actually thought I was writing nonfiction, but then something else took over. Suddenly I wasn’t just talking about jellyfish, I was talking about guilt, and regret, and middle school, and friendships, and zombie ants, and the scale of the universe, and Diana Nyad, and heroes, and parenting, and so on. I don’t think the conscious part of my brain could have woven those things together, no matter how much time I’d been given. They were strung together in some dark, murky part of my brain. I don’t know what that alchemy is, or where it comes from. And I certainly don’t know how to control it (I wish I did). But when it works, it feels like magic.
Tim Manley is the writer and illustrator of Alice in Tumblr-land: And Other Fairy Tales for a New Generation, and the co-writer of The 10 Letters Project. His one-person show, Feelings, debuted this year at the New York International Fringe Festival. He is online at timmanleytimmanley.com.

http://www.nationalbook.org/nba2015_ypl_benjamin_interv.html#.V6uNz_krKUk
Author FAQ

I’ve done a number of Q&As like this one, for the National Book Foundation, and this one for talkSTEM, and this one for the Chicago Public Library. But here are some additional questions that real kids have asked me:

What was your childhood and schooling experiences like growing up?

It was the 1970s. My sister and I ran loose all over the neighborhood, playing Little House on the Prairie and Kick The Can. At night, all the kids would play Flashlight Tag. There were no cell phones, so the only way my mother could tell us she wanted us home was to ring a cow bell. When we heard the cowbell, we knew it was time to run home. It wasn’t always safe — once, a neighbor boy locked us in a shed. There was also a mean man who yelled at us all the time. That wasn’t so great.

Where did you receive your education and do you have any degrees?

I went to Grinnell College in Iowa, and I have a Masters in Public Administration from Baruch College, the City University of New York. I don’t use that MPA anymore, but at the time, I was proud of having gotten it.

What are your hobbies when you’re not writing?

I have an Australian shepherd (dog) whom I adore, and I like to take her on walks. I help out a lot at my kids’ school, taking pictures. I’m kind of a do-gooder, too — I volunteer at lots of organizations in town. I also like spending time with friends, though when you’re a grownup and a parent, you don’t get nearly as much time with friends as you like.

What would be some characteristics of your writing style?

Hm. That’s a good question. When I write, I’m kind of scattered, I write things out of order, and I use a lot of post-its and index cards. I look around for things that interest me (like jellyfish!), and I try to go as deep into those subjects as possible. Right now, I’m fascinated by Isaac Newton, so he might show up in another book!

What is your family life like today?

Chaotic! I have two kids, Merrie (14) and Charlotte (9). They are very busy, and I try to spend as much time with them as possible. I’m married to a guy named Blair, who I met in high school!

What are your favorite writing resources?
Here are a few of the resources I’ve personally found helpful:

**The War of Art**, by Steven Pressfield. This is is the best, most painful, kick-in-the-butt a writer will ever get. While you’re visiting his web site, I also highly recommend getting on his email list. His weekly tips are terrific.

**The Writing Life**, by Annie Dillard. Apparently Dillard called this book embarrassing. I disagree. Although I’ve always loved the language and ideas, this work took on new meaning once I’d written a book or two.

**Big Magic**, by Elizabeth Gilbert. Elizabeth wants you to trust the universe and do your work…and she’s right. Also check out her TED talk, and her *Magic Lessons* podcast.

**Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life** by Anne Lamott — if nothing else, read the chapter Sh*tty First Drafts. Then write a sh*tty first draft. Then tear it to shreds and build it back up again.

Editor/agent Eric Nelson’s [How to Think Like Your Agent Tumblr](http://alibenjamin.com/site/faq/) has cogent advice about story, among other writerly concerns.

**I’m struggling with my writing project. What advice do you have?**

If you’re frustrated and despairing, fear not. We’ve all been there. In fact, there’s a very good chance that at the very moment you’re reading this, I, too, am frustrated and despairing in my writer’s cave. It’s not for the faint of heart, this writing gig. The best advice I can offer you is this: keep going. Also, writing is murky, and that’s okay. You don’t have to see a clear path to a finished product yet: you just need to know a single next step. By the time you’ve completed that step, chances are good you’ll see another thing that needs to be done. For the record, when I was finishing THE THING ABOUT JELLYFISH, I was so frustrated with my own ability to get it right, I literally walked around holding a pencil between my teeth in order to stay positive. So maybe try that. Oh, and that thing you’re afraid to put in there? The thing that you think will never resonate with anyone? The thing that makes you feel super-vulnerable, like you’re standing in your middle school hallway in your pajamas and everyone is laughing at you? That, right there, might just be the heart of your book.

http://alibenjamin.com/site/faq/