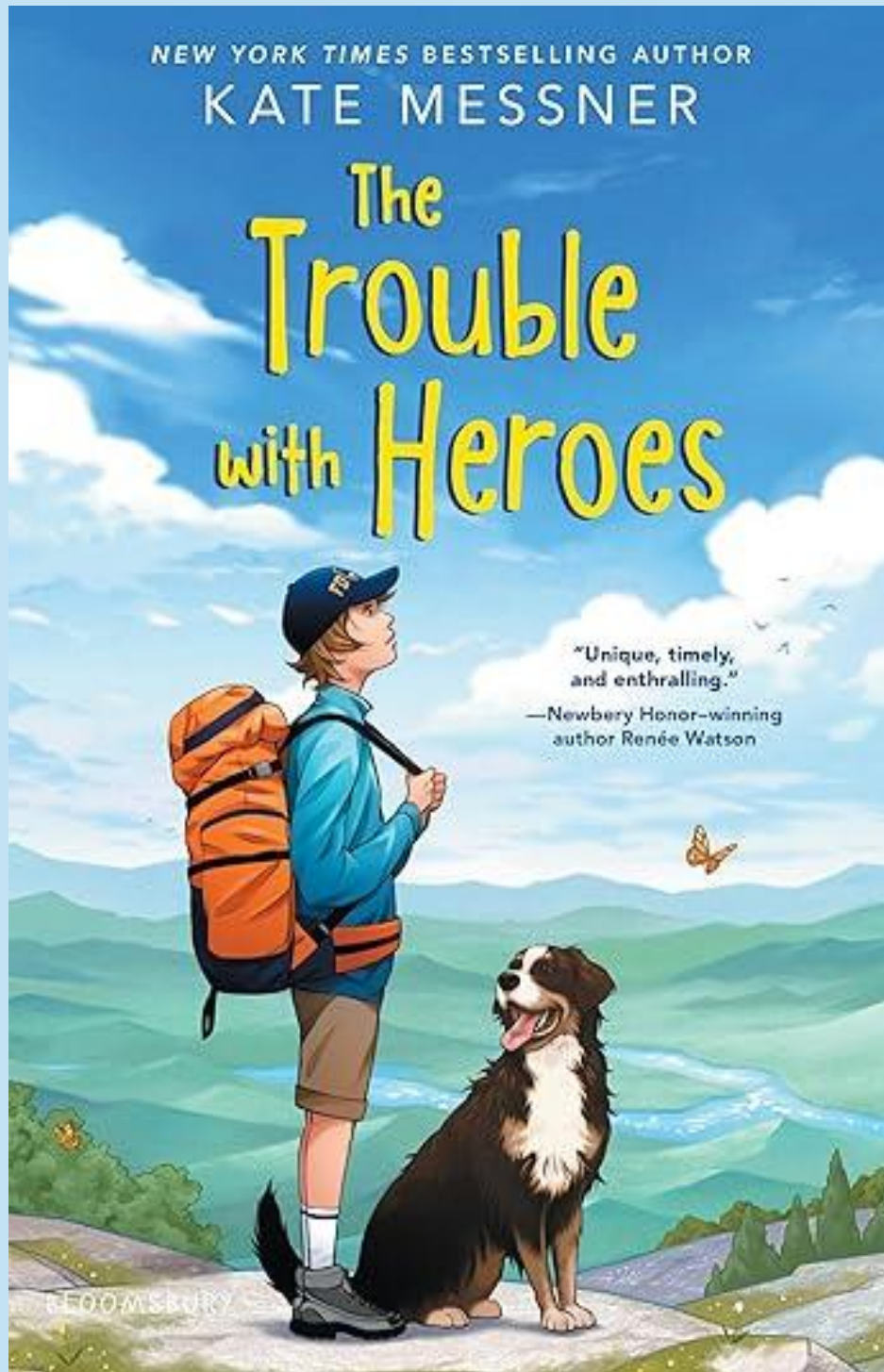


BOOKBabble To Go  
Book Club Kit



# Summary

One summer.

46 mountain peaks.

A second chance to make things right.

This middle-grade novel, largely told in verse, centers on 13-year-old Finn Connelly, a seventh-grader struggling with immense grief and anger after the death of his father during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finn is on the verge of failing seventh grade and has never achieved anything noteworthy.

Finn is nothing like his dad, a star athlete and firefighter hero who always ran toward danger until he died two years ago. Finn's about to fail seventh grade and has never made headlines . . . until now.

Caught on camera vandalizing a cemetery, he's in big trouble for kicking down some dead old lady's headstone. But it turns out that grave belongs to a legendary local mountain climber, and her daughter makes Finn an unusual offer: climb all forty-six Adirondack High Peaks with her dead mother's dog, and they can call it even.

In a wild three months of misadventures, mountain mud, and unexpected mentors, Finn begins to find his way on the trails. At the top of each peak, he can see for miles and slowly begins to understand more about himself and his dad. But the mountains don't care about any of that, and as the clock ticks down to September, they have more surprises in store. Finn's final summit challenge may be more than even a hero can face.

## About the Author

New York Times bestselling author Kate Messner is passionately curious and has written over seventy books for kids who wonder, too. Her titles include award-winning picture books like *Over and Under the Snow*, *The Next Scientist*, and *The Scariest Kitten in the World*, as well as novels for older readers like *Breakout* and *The Trouble with Heroes*. Kate also writes the popular History Smashers graphic nonfiction series and the Ranger in Time historical adventures, and she leads the multi-author team behind *The Kids in Mrs. Z's Class* chapter books. Kate lives on Lake Champlain and is a proud Adirondack 46er.

Kate's titles are frequently selected for One School, One Book, and One School/One Author programs and other community-wide reads. Her books have been New York Times Notable, Junior Library Guild, IndieBound, and Bank Street College of Education Best Books selections. Her novel *The Brilliant Fall of Gianna Z.* won the E.B. White Read Aloud Medal, and her science picture books have been finalists for the American Academy for the Advancement of Sciences/Subaru SB&F prize for excellence in science writing. In 2020, Kate was honored with New York's Knickerbocker Award for creating a superior body of work supporting curriculum and educational goals.

Before becoming a full-time writer, Kate was a TV news reporter as well as a National Board Certified educator. She grew up in Medina, NY and graduated from Syracuse University's S.I. Newhouse School with a degree in Broadcast Journalism. Kate spent seven years working as a television news producer and reporter in Syracuse, NY and Burlington, VT before going back to school to earn a master's degree in education for secondary-level English Language Arts. She taught middle school language arts for fifteen years before leaving the classroom to write full time but still spends much of her time in schools, working with kids as a visiting author.

# Author Q & A

Indie Next List Interview

**Bookselling This Week: Your author's letter explained how *The Trouble with Heroes* started in 2015 as a few scribbled poems when you first started tackling the Adirondack. I'd love to hear more about the evolution of this piece over the years.**

**Kate Messner:** I started writing *The Trouble with Heroes* not long after I began my own quest to become an Adirondack 46er. In the novel, Finn has to climb these 46 mountains in a single summer, but it took me eight years to summit them all. I bring my writer's notebook everywhere I go, even when I'm climbing mountains, and I found that when I reached a summit, I felt like writing poetry. For the first few years of these hikes, I didn't realize I was writing a novel in verse — until some of the poems started coming out in a voice that wasn't mine. A voice that was younger and snarkier. An angry voice with a deep well of sadness underneath.

As a writer, I've learned to trust those voices and follow them, so I started thinking about a character climbing the 46 Adirondack High Peaks not by choice but because he had to. But why? I spent some more summers hiking, writing poems, brainstorming, and trying to figure out who this character really was. But it was after the pandemic hit in 2020 that the story really came together. Living through the collective trauma and sadness of the pandemic's early days helped me understand Finn in a way I hadn't before.

After the world shut down in 2020, my family and I headed out hiking again as soon as we could. It was the one place where life still felt normal. And the mountains brought me back to being a writer again. On the trails, I met people who inspired the "trail nannies" who accompany Finn on his journey as well as some great hiking dogs who served as the inspiration for Seymour. Once the ideas behind this book had time to soak in the world for a while, I went back to the page, and Finn's story finally came together.

**BTW: I love how much of this story is geographically based in reality and in your experiences — you're an Adirondack 46er, the mountains Finn tackles (and the details of those climbs) are all real. (I'm especially curious if the photos in Finn's texts are yours.) Which of the peaks was your favorite? And did Finn's assessment of it match yours?**

**KM:** Many of Finn's details about his climbs are drawn from my own hiking journals. Back in the day, if you wanted to become an Adirondack 46er, you recorded each climb by writing letters to the 46er group's recording secretary, Grace Hudowalski, who was also the first woman to record climbing all of the High Peaks. (Edna in *The Trouble with Heroes* is loosely based on Grace, who passed away in 2004 and now has a mountain named after her.) By the time I started hiking the High Peaks, aspiring 46ers logged climbs online instead. But I wished I'd had the chance to climb while Grace was around, so I wrote her letters anyway, and instead of mailing them, shared them on my website. I revisited these entries over and over again while I was writing and revising this novel. (And yes...Finn's photos are from my hikes, too!)

My favorite hike was Big Slide, a peak I hiked solo for the first time on a perfect autumn day in 2015. The trail to this peak first ascends three smaller mountains called The Brothers, a detail Finn laments in a poem called “Somebody Should Have Told Me.” The scrambles up the first two brothers were rocky, steep, and exhilarating, and the fall colors were breathtaking. I loved it so much and gushed about it in my letter to Grace when I got home.

**BTW:** Through *Finn*, this book tackles two historic and traumatic events — the pandemic and 9/11 — as well as the universal grief of losing a loved one. It’s a big task for a book, but it seems like it helped you process your experiences, and may help readers of all ages do the same. What are you hoping readers will take away from Finn’s story?

**KM:** There’s a moment near the end of this book when Finn is amazed by all the people who show up for him, again and again, even after all the times he’s messed up. This is a kid who felt like a lost cause but realizes through a summer of hiking, poetry, unexpected mentors, and a drooly canine companion that he’s not alone. And that’s always what I want my readers to know, too — that no matter what you’ve done or how lost you feel, there are trails you can follow home.

**BTW:** Now that *The Trouble with Heroes* is out in the world, what’s next for you?

**KM:** Oh gosh, this is a super busy year! I have a new chapter book series on the way. Wildlife Rescue launches in September with two books: *How to Save an Otter* and *How to Save an Owl*, published by Bloomsbury and illustrated by Jen Bricking.

I have two more History Smashers books coming soon from Random House Kids. That’s our illustrated nonfiction series that smashes historical myths, and up next on the agenda are *Ancient Egypt* (October 2025) and *The Space Race* (Spring 2026), both illustrated by Falynn Koch, with cover art by Dylan Meconis.

For picture books, *Over and Under the Coral Reef*, illustrated by Christopher Silas Neal, comes out this fall. It’s the eighth book in our Over & Under nature picture book series with Chronicle, and Chris’ art in this one is absolutely stunning.

And I have another outdoorsy picture book coming in August. *First Ascent: The Epic Yosemite Rock Climbing Rivalry of Royal Robbins and Warren Harding*, illustrated by Stevie Lewis and published by Yosemite Conservancy, is about a fierce rivalry between two climbers who pushed the sport to new heights during Yosemite Valley’s Golden Age.

I’m also working on a new novel for middle grade readers — a ghost story set in a Broadway theater — and continuing to coordinate the multi-author chapter book series *The Kids in Mrs. Z’s Class* with Little, Brown. We have two fantastic new installments that just came out — Eliot Schrefer’s *Wyatt Hill Brings a Lizard to School* and Kekla Magoon’s *Ayana Ndoum Takes the Stage*. And this summer, Linda Urban and Olugbemisola Rhuday-Perkovich join the class with *Olive Little Gets Crafty* and *Synclaire Fields Knows the Store*. We’ve had so much fun collaborating on this series!

**BTW:** This book is a reminder of how powerful a story can be. Would you tell us a bit about the role of books and indie bookstores in your life?

**KM:** I was a huge reader growing up, but our small town didn't have a bookstore back then, so I had to make do with the public library and Archie comics from the drugstore. Happily, that's changed, and Medina, New York, now has the amazing Author's Note, owned by author & bookseller Julie Berry. I also feel beyond lucky to live near a handful of amazing indies, including The Bookstore Plus in Lake Placid, which is owned by a whole family of Adirondack 46ers! Every time I visited while I was working on my 46, Sarah, Marc, and Norah would not only recommend books but also ask what I was climbing next and offer advice. I can't spend a day in Vermont without stopping at Burlington's Phoenix Books or Flying Pig Bookstore in Shelburne. And of course, I love having the opportunity to spend time with booksellers from far and wide when I'm traveling on book tour.

When you walk into an independent bookstore, it just feels different from any other store. There's the welcoming smile and the smell of fresh pages (and sometimes coffee, too). But even more than that is the feeling of community, knowing you're in a place where stories are valued, and where everyone's story matters. I'd love it if the whole world could be more like an indie bookstore.

## Notable Quotes

Did you highlight or bookmark any passages from the book? Did you have a favorite quote or quotes? If so, share which ones and why.

Here are a few that other readers shared:

“Sometimes people don't know why they're climbing. They only know it's better than hurting standing still.”

“Sometimes they fizzle. Sometimes they crash and burn. Sometimes they explode.”

“Allen Mountain Cookies

Bake regular chocolate chip cookies. Then pour a few gallons of water on them. And some melted butter, so they're good and greasy. Then try to frost them with vanilla frosting. It won't work but try anyway. Drizzle on some red food coloring for the slime. The cookies will be a hot mess and so will you.

Ta-da!

You have captured the spirit of Allen Mountain.

(I'm just kidding. Don't really do any of that. Just make some chocolate chip cookies and call it a day.)”

## Discussion Questions

1. Which character did you feel most protective of – Finn, his mom, Kelly, or someone else? Why?
2. This book is marketed to middle grade readers but deals with grief, addiction, and financial stress. How did the story's tone and reading level work for you as an adult?
3. Finn is angry at this father for dying and for the mess he left behind. Did that reaction feel believable to you, and have you seen similar reactions in real life?
4. How did your opinion of Finn's father shift as you learned more about his heroism, his addiction, and his absences from home? Did the book allow you to hold both admiration and disappointment at the same time?
5. Where did you see Finn's mom and grandmother quietly holding things together (money, household, emotional support)? Did anything about their situation resonate with you?
6. The book raises the question of what it really means to be a hero, especially for first responders and frontline workers connected to 9/11 and COVID. After reading, how would you define a hero?
7. Do you think society sometimes puts too much pressure on certain jobs, such as firefighters, EMTs, nurses, soldiers, etc., to be heroic all the time? What unseen costs did you notice in Finn's family and community?
8. Who are the "everyday heroes" in this story? Which one stuck with you?
9. Instead of a typical punishment for vandalizing Edna's grave, Finn is asked to hike all 46 Adirondack High Peaks with her dog as a kind of reparation. Do you see this as fair, too gentle, or harder than a standard punishment?
10. Have you ever seen a situation where someone was changed more by a second chance than by a formal penalty? How does that experience color your view of Finn's "sentence"?
11. Edna's influence on Finn comes mostly through her past hikes and the letters and stories she left behind. What did the book suggest to you about the kind of legacy an older person can leave in a community?
12. If you were to leave a letter or one piece of advice for a younger person facing grief or failure, what would you say?
13. The Adirondack mountains and hiking culture are central to the book, including all the blisters and bad weather. Did the outdoor setting make the emotional journey more relatable or more distant for you?
14. The story is written in verse and includes different poem forms as part of Finn's school assignment. How did this format impact your reading experience?
15. Was there a particular hike, poem, or image that has stayed with you? What do you think made it stand out?

# Recipes

## **Wright, Algonquin, and Iroquois Cookies**

Grease a cookie sheet and preheat oven to 375 degrees

Ingredients:

½ c. sugar

1 c. brown sugar

2 eggs

1 c. (2 sticks) of butter, softened not melted

2 tsp. vanilla extract

1 c. crunchy peanut butter

1 tsp. baking powder

1 tsp. baking soda

½ tsp. salt

2 ½ c. flour

1 c. chocolate chips

1 c. chopped up peanut butter cups

Mix together sugar, peanut butter, and wet ingredients until smooth.

Stir in salt, baking soda, and baking powder.

Stir in flour.

Add chocolate chips, peanut butter cup pieces, and mix.

Scoop balls of dough onto cookie sheet two inches apart.

Bake at 375 degrees about ten minutes, until edges are golden brown.

Cool on a baking rack before eating.



## Enhance Your Book Club

- Watch an interview of Kate Messner on Backstory Podcast as they dive into the work of storytelling. Discover how Kate's insatiable curiosity fuels her diverse writing career, from picture books to graphic novels. Learn about her journey from teaching middle school to becoming a celebrated author, and how her passion for history and adventure shapes her stories. Whether you're an aspiring writer or a book lover, this episode is packed with insights and inspiration. Don't miss out on Kate's tales of climbing the Adirondack peaks and her adventures in international school visits. <https://youtu.be/pszgEFKS1rw?si=f-V48E-OLKAuDfPm>
- Take a virtual journey through the Adirondacks and learn about this stunning region, or settle in and map out your next armchair travel adventure. [www.visitadirondacks.com](http://www.visitadirondacks.com)
- Learn more about Grace Hudowalski (Edna Grace Thomas): <https://courses.hamilton.edu/hiking-the-46ers/grace-hudowalski>
- September 11, 2001 is a day that changed our nation forever. What memories do you carry? The National September 11 Memorial & Museum offers meaningful ways to reflect and remember. Visit online and select Learn, then Resources for free access to digital exhibitions, interactive timelines, and powerful oral histories. <https://www.911memorial.org/learn>
- Learn about the 9/11 Survivor Tree: <https://911groundzero.com/blog/the-story-of-the-9-11-survivor-tree-and-what-it-means/>
- Visit the George W. Bush Presidential Library's 9/11: The Steel of American Resolve online exhibit <https://www.georgewbushlibrary.gov/explore/exhibits/9-11-the-steel-of-american-resolve#main> or visit in person at 2943 SMU Boulevard, Dallas, TX 75205

# Read-Alikes

## **Novels in Verse:**

*The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo

A 2018 National Book Award Finalist! A young girl in Harlem discovers slam poetry as a way to understand her mother's religion and her own relationship to the world in this debut novel by renowned slam poet Acevedo.

*Me (Moth)* by Amber McBride

A debut YA novel-in-verse by Amber McBride, *Me (Moth)* is about a teen girl who is grieving the deaths of her family, and a teen boy who crosses her path.

*Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds

A recipient of Newbery, Printz, and Coretta Scott King Honors, this fiercely stunning novel by "New York Times" bestselling author Reynolds takes place in 60 potent seconds--the time it takes a kid to decide whether or not he's going to murder the guy who shot and killed his brother.

*Crossover* by Kwame Alexander

Fourteen-year-old twin basketball stars Josh and Jordan wrestle with highs and lows on and off the court as their father ignores his declining health.

## **Healing in Nature:**

*A Walk in the Woods* by Bill Bryson

For a start there's the gloriously out-of-shape Stephen Katz, a buddy from Iowa along for the walk. Despite Katz's overwhelming desire to find cozy restaurants, he and Bryson eventually settle into their stride, and while on the trail they meet a bizarre assortment of hilarious characters. But *A Walk in the Woods* is more than just a laugh-out-loud hike. Bryson's acute eye is a wise witness to this beautiful but fragile trail, and as he tells its fascinating history, he makes a moving plea for the conservation of America's last great wilderness. An adventure, a comedy, and a celebration, *A Walk in the Woods* is destined to become a modern classic of travel literature.

*Grandma Gatewood's Walk* by Ben Montgomery

The inspiring true story of Emma Gatewood, a 67-year-old grandmother who became the first woman to hike the entire Appalachian Trail alone. Carrying only simple supplies and fierce determination, she overcame physical hardship, dangerous terrain, and her own painful past. Her journey became a national sensation and helped bring attention to the Appalachian Trail, proving that resilience and courage can redefine what is possible at any age.

*Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* by Cheryl Strayed

At twenty-two, Cheryl Strayed thought she had lost everything. In the wake of her mother's death, her family scattered and her own marriage was soon destroyed. Four years later, with nothing more to lose, she made the most impulsive decision of her life. With no experience or training, driven only by blind will, she would hike more than a thousand miles of the Pacific Crest Trail from the Mojave Desert through California and Oregon to Washington State--and she would do it alone.

## Read-Alikes

*H Is for Hawk* by Helen MacDonald

An instant bestseller, Helen MacDonald's story of adopting and raising one of nature's most vicious predators has soared into the hearts of millions of readers worldwide. Fierce and feral, her goshawk Mabel's temperament mirrors Helen's own state of grief after her father's death, and together raptor and human "discover the pain and beauty of being alive" (People). *H Is for Hawk* is a genre-defying debut from one of our most unique and transcendent voices.

### **Remembering 9/11:**

*Towers Falling* by Jewell Parker Rhodes

When her fifth-grade teacher hints that a series of lessons about home and community will culminate with one big answer about two tall towers once visible outside their classroom window, Dèja can't help but feel confused. She sets off on a journey of discovery, with new friends Ben and Sabeen by her side. But just as she gets closer to answering big questions about who she is, what America means, and how communities can grow (and heal), she uncovers new questions, too. Like, why does Pop get so angry when she brings up anything about the towers?

*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer

Oskar Schell is an inventor, Francophile, tambourine player, Shakespearean actor, jeweler, and pacifist. He is nine years old. And he is on an urgent, secret search through the five boroughs of New York to find the lock that fits a mysterious key belonging to his father, who died in the attacks on the World Trade Center.

*The Only Plane in the Sky* by Garrett M. Graff

Garrett Graff tells the story of the day as it was *lived*—in the words of those who lived it. Drawing on never-before-published transcripts, declassified documents, original interviews, and oral histories from nearly five hundred government officials, first responders, witnesses, survivors, friends, and family members, he paints the most vivid and human portrait of the September 11 attacks yet.