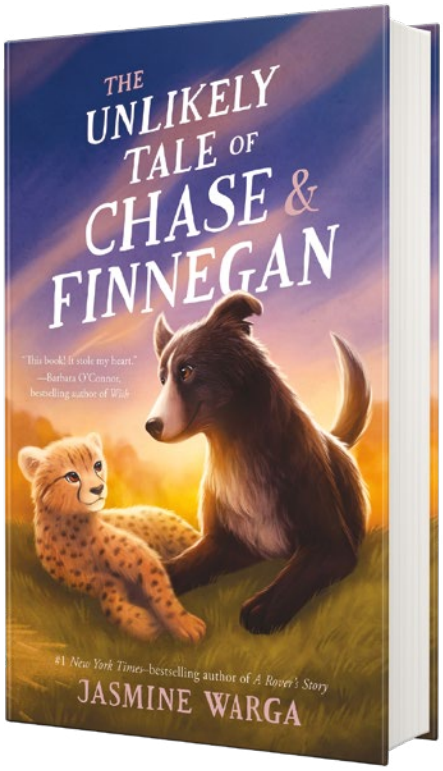
A Discussion Guide for

THE UNLIKELY TALE OF CHASE & FINNEGAN

ABOUT THE BOOK

From the Newbery Honor winner and #1 *New York Times* best selling author of *A Rover's Story* comes the moving tale of a cheetah who forms a friendship with a rescue dog—a bond that will change their lives forever. Perfect for fans of Katherine Applegate and Rosanne Parry.



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Finnegan is a rescue dog with a broken heart.
Chase is a newly orphaned cheetah cub.

The two animals couldn't be more different. But one day, they are brought together for the unlikeliest of reasons: Finnegan must help Chase gain the confidence she needs to perform as part of an educational program for children at a zoo.

Finnegan and Chase have each suffered losses and have trouble trusting. Yet somehow, they are just what the other needs. But if Finnegan isn't able to help Chase overcome her fears, he won't only be letting Chase down—he could be risking his new home as well.

Inspired by true stories from zoos across the country, award-winning author Jasmine Warga creates a deeply moving tale about how the power of friendship can transcend anything—even species.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jasmine Warga is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *A Rover's Story*, *The Shape of Thunder*, and *A Strange Thing Happened in Cherry Hall*. Her book *Other Words for Home* received a Newbery Honor and Walter Honor, among numerous other awards. *Here We Are Now* and *My Heart and Other Black Holes*, her novels for teens, have been translated into more than twenty-five languages. She lives in the Chicago area with her family.

PRE-READING QUESTIONS

This book is a fictional story about two animals who aren't usually friends in the wild but are sometimes paired in zoos. Read more here and write down three facts you learned to share with your classmates. What examples have you seen of animals being friends?

- The characters in this story have anxieties—though they're different. Take a piece of notebook paper and fold it in half. Inside, write down a list of worries, fears, and anxieties. What do you worry about, what makes you uneasy? Use this emotions wheel to describe how you feel. We won't share these aloud, so this list is just for you.
- The dedication page reads, "For anyone who has ever felt like the only one." What do you think this means, and why do you think Warga wrote it? Teachers, you might ask that students revisit this dedication at the end of the story as well. How does your thinking about this dedication change, now that you've read the whole book?

DURING READING QUESTIONS

Endings and Beginnings

- On page 27 it says, "He knows now that humans can have moods that change as swiftly as the wind." What do you think the author means by this? This line is an example of a simile, where two things are compared using the words *like* or *as.* Write two similes about human emotions you have felt.
- On pages 32–35, Chase the cheetah cub is with her mother and Basma, and is trying to make sense of a lot of things. She has emotions swirling inside her—and she's trying to decipher humans and their language. Depict (with drawings) what you envision from these passages when you reread them or when they're read aloud. Include one or two quotes from the text to support your drawings. What stands out to you from these pages?

Goodbyes and Hellos

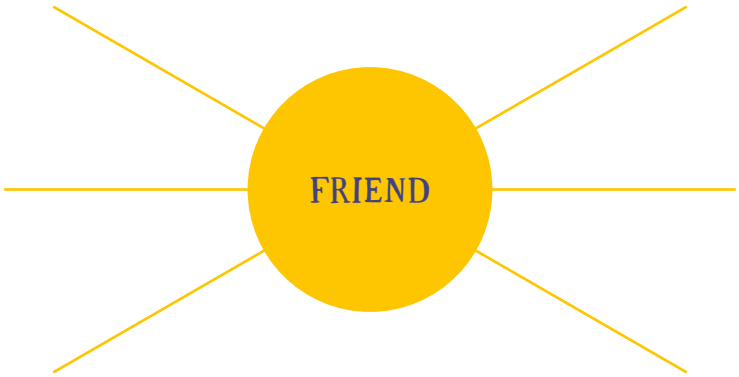
On page 42, readers can infer that something bad might happen next. What lines from the book make you think that? There's a crescendo to Chase's worry. Teachers, you might share this page alone with readers to help them build evidence from the text to support their inferences about what might come.

- Page 49 is about the grief of losing someone close to you, the deep pain of missing a family member. Warga writes that "grief is like an appendage" (which is another simile). What do you think this means? Have you ever lost someone close to you? Sometimes, grief doesn't go away but instead our capacity to carry it changes. Watch throughout the text how Chase's relationship with grief changes. Teachers, if your students are ready for it, you might ask them to write about this at the end of the book.
- Throughout the story, readers learn about Finnegan's past—memories that he feels shame around. What do we learn on page 61 and how do you think Finnegan feels?
- On page 63, the author writes, "But he doesn't understand why Basma, who seems so nice, smells like danger." What makes Finnegan scared of Basma, and what in the text makes you think that?

- Chase's feelings change throughout the story. On page 66, when Basma brings a clicker for training, Chase feels triggered. How is her grief changing?
- On page 68, we read that Chase's "fearful thoughts inside her mind" are "flittering like insects." What anxieties does she have bouncing around in her head? What about your own anxieties? Teachers, you might ask students to write their worries in an image of several balloons on a page. Have them close their eyes and visualize letting go of each, one by one, until they float a teeny-tiny bit above them in the sky. This exercise is one of mindfulness and recognition of our emotions that constantly ebb and flow. Page 85 continues this work. Warga writes, "And the voice in her head says, *The people will be noisy and scary. What if you make a mistake? What if you do everything wrong?* When this voice comes, it is loud and roaring. She tries to block it out, but it worms its way into her mind, staying at the forefront of her consciousness. It makes her miss her jumps . . ." Later, on page 102, Finnegan grapples with his own worries: "His stomach swoops at the idea that there could be other tests. Tests that he won't be able to pass, that will reveal for him the kind of dog he really is." What do each of these characters worry about and why? Our anxieties sometimes distract us enormously, and sometimes become louder than our confidence. How does Chase learn throughout the story to quiet these worries?
- Page 70 includes Basma teaching Chase that mistakes will happen and that growth comes from repeated practice. Teachers, here, we might lean into cultivating mistake-making spaces—naming with students where they made "beautiful oops," mistakes that either turned into a lovely learning experience or led to a more beautiful, sometimes unexpected result. Consider layering in additional texts, depending on timing, about mistakes.
- More of Finnegan's anxieties come to the surface on page 81, when the sound of thunder terrifies him. Maybe you relate to feeling disconnected by the present—or feeling far away because of your fears. Chat with your classmates. How are your fears similar to or different from theirs?
- On page 89, we learn more about Basma's and Ryan's characteristics based on Finnegan's observations. Make a list for each character. What do we know about them? Teachers, prompt your students to return and add to this T-chart throughout reading. You might ask that they create a column for Chase and Finnegan, too. What characteristics, both external and internal, do we know about each character?

BASMA	RYAN	CHASE	FINNEGAN

- There are beautiful descriptive phrases at the top of page 98. Teachers, you can ask students to draw what they visualize, or use the page as a mentor text to write their own mini passages that describe their current season and settings.
- The scene where Chase and Finnegan meet each other is a beautiful one to linger on. Pause on page 112. There's so much to visualize here. Make a movie in your mind. How does Finnegan describe Chase?
- In chapter 20, the animals are learning what the word *friend* means. Make a wheel with a circle in the middle that says *friend*. Draw spokes that emanate from the wheel. What does being a friend entail? What does it mean to you? How do we learn from friends who are different from us, and who have had different experiences? How do we connect to friends who are similar to us? Teachers, you might read page 127, when the animals are looking at snow, to springboard a discussion with students about times when they shared new experiences with their friends.



- On page 142, Finnegan learns that Ryan wants to ask Basma a question. What does he want to ask, and how do we know?
- Teachers, you might replicate the wheel from above, but with the word *family* in the center. What does family—and chosen family—mean to you? Prompt students to close their eyes. Ask these questions aloud: When I say the word *family*, who or what do you envision? Do you envision a specific place? Certain sounds? Who is in your circle of care? These need not be solely blood relatives—but instead, people who helped you grow. Now open your eyes. Add to your *family* wheel. Who shows up? Teachers, pause when you read aloud page 148, which includes the learning of words *friend* and *family*. Ask that students add to their wheels.

Family

- On page 163, Chase is reflecting on her performance. She's wondering how she could have been better. How does Finnegan show up as a solid friend here?
- Throughout their relationship, the animals in the story teach each other. What does Finnegan teach Chase about family on pages 166 and 167, and what does Chase push Finnegan to understand about friendship?
- What do we finally learn about Finnegan's past in chapter 29?
- The resolution of this text is one that includes many lessons. What does Finnegan ultimately learn about friendship and family? Use evidence from page 215 to explain your thoughts.

EXTENDED WRITING

- This book tells the story of two unlikely friends, who become as close as family. Think of someone in your chosen family and write about your likely or unlikely friendship. What do they mean to you and why? If they weren't in your life, how would it be markedly different? Teachers, consider sharing your own personal writing and examples as a mentor text for students to emulate.
- After reading the facts at the end of the book about cheetahs and dogs, you might consider asking students to create their own informational zines about the animals, including additional research and drawings. Additionally, ensure students reference their sources and suggest that they create an "about the author" page for themselves before submission and sharing with a wider audience. Consider using Warga's "about the author" page as an example.
- The story lends itself beautifully to one-book, one-school readings. There's so much love in this story, not only between humans and animals but also between different species of animals. Consider asking families to visually depict their loved ones, including pets, in a constellation of care—including all of the relationships that are important to us in our lives. Read more on constellations of care and community maps here.

This guide was written by Nawal Qarooni, a teacher educator and consultant for school districts across the country in literacy and family engagement. She and her team of coaches at NQC Literacy provide professional learning for teachers in foundational skills, culturally sustaining pedagogies, and literacy curricular work. She is a graduate of the University of Michigan, holds two master's degrees from Syracuse University and Brooklyn College, and is a member of the Library of Congress Literacy Advisory Board. She is the author of *Nourishing Caregiver Collaborations: Exalting Home Experiences and Classroom Practices for Collective Care.*