



# The Trouble with Heroes

by Kate Messner

ISBN#: 9781547616398

[www.katemessner.com](http://www.katemessner.com)

## An Educator's Guide for Classroom Use

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### About *The Trouble with Heroes*

One summer.

46 mountain peaks.

A second chance to make things right.

Finn Connelly 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.

See more at: [www.bloomsbury.com](http://www.bloomsbury.com)

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## Teacher to Teacher

Dear Colleague,

Whether you are picking up *The Trouble with Heroes* because you've happened upon it, or a search led you to it, or because you have—like me—come to trust and depend on Kate Messner as an author who consistently produces heartfelt and relatable middle grade that resonates with young readers as true and reflective of the world that they are navigating, welcome to the journey. In Kate's ode to the mountains as a place of beauty, humility, and healing, she crafts the complexities of what it is to carry grief alongside a trail checklist, middle school homework, and heroic shoes to fill. In the invitation to vicariously adventure in the High Peaks of the Adirondacks with Finn, readers will quite possibly uncover insights about themselves and what it means to be human, too. Good reading!

Melissa Guerrette  
Grade 5 Teacher

## Discussion Questions

### Before Reading

- Brainstorm the people who come to mind when you think of “heroes.” What makes someone a hero? If students don’t already include firefighters, EMTs, and other emergency personnel in their brainstorm, add this group as your own suggestion.
- Why might it feel good to be acknowledged as a hero? What might be hard about that title?

### pp. 1–14

- Who is Finn Connelly? Piece together what you know from what Finn tells us (and what he doesn’t) and what you infer from the included artifacts like the newspaper article and the school notice.
- What is the tone of Finn’s poetry? What details and examples in his writing suggest that tone and why?
- What clues are there in these early pages that help describe the setting of this novel? Think about both place and time.
- What have you learned about Finn’s family?

### pp. 15–31

- Why is Finn caught up with the word or idea of a hero?
- How do you think the introduction to Finn and his situation might have been different if another character were narrating the book?
- What are reparations? Does Kelly’s idea for reparations surprise you? Why or why not? How does this consequence seem like a fitting choice for Finn’s actions?
- Unpack Finn’s flashback about packed backpacks. What is important for us to know about his family history from this memory? Why might this matter now, when he is facing the start of his reparations?
- What happened when Kelly offered Finn her mother’s hiking boots?

### pp. 32–55

- Why does Finn tell his mother about George Cheney? What outcome is he hoping for or expecting?
- What actually makes Finn’s mom nervous about his hiking plans?
- What is Finn’s impression of Annie (Cow Nanny/Nanny #1)? How does he feel about having Annie’s company on the trail? How does he feel about having Seymour’s company on the trail?

### pp. 56–76

- What “made the world stop”?

- How did Kelly explain Edna’s dedication to reading and responding to the letters she received from Adirondack hikers?
- How is Finn similar to Gill Brook?
- What are Finn’s feelings as he finishes hiking Indian Head?

pp. 77–101

- What is different as Finn starts out for Cascade and Porter this time? Why?
- What do you think about Minh’s and Jesse’s notes to Finn in his yearbook and Finn’s interpretations?
- Describe Sam (Nerd Nanny/Nanny #2).
- On p. 91, Sam offers Finn some wisdom, saying, “*You don’t need to see your destination, you just need faith enough to put one foot in front of the other.*” How might this advice make a difference beyond the hiking trail?
- Are you surprised by the way Finn helps Seymour on Big Slide? Why or why not? What can we learn about Finn from the way he interacts with Edna’s dog?
- What do Finn’s memories of his dad’s magic tricks (p. 83) and the burned cookies (p. 99) tell you about his relationships with his dad?

pp. 102–123

- Reread the poem *Admired* (p. 105). What do you think: Does someone only become a hero when someone else knows about what they did and admires them, or can someone be a hero quietly if no one else knows?
- What surprises Finn about Coach (Nanny #3)?
- In high school, Finn’s mom loved theater and played Mary Poppins. Finn’s dad was a hockey star and cheered for the 1980 US Olympic team. How do those pastimes relate to “doing the impossible?”
- Why had Coach visited Finn’s dad at his house?
- What does Coach’s silence “say” at the end of the Street and Nye hikes? How is Finn feeling as he wraps up his hikes of Street and Nye?

pp. 124–152

- Finn starts these pages disappointed he isn’t hiking with Coach, saying, “*I have questions/and it feels like he has answers*” (p. 124). What questions do you imagine Finn wants to ask Coach?
- Do you think Finn could invite Minh on a hike or not? Why do you think he is so hesitant to?
- What signs are there that Finn’s attitude about climbing the Adirondacks as reparations is beginning to change? Why do you think that is?
- What does Finn find out about his dad from Coach’s memories? How does this compare to his own memories of his father?

- Why is a “humph” from Coach a big deal to Finn?
- What was Finn’s dad’s big worry and why?

pp. 153–177

- What are the ghosts, pains, or nightmares that Finn is referring to in the poem “The Trouble with Heroes” (p. 153)?
- Why and how does Finn explain to Ms. Garcia that his hero poems are going to be different?
- How does Noah Connelly’s obituary match with what you thought you knew about him? What are you surprised by and/or what do you still wonder or want to know?
- Why did Finn’s dad go north to Lake Placid before Labor Day each year?
- What is Finn learning about himself as he completes these hikes?

pp. 178–203

- Why is Finn angry to discover the letter to his father from Edna Grace Thomas? How does his feeling change and why?
- Why is Finn looking for the toxicology report? What does he hope it will tell him?
- Finn admires Sam’s climbing skills and his climbing gear. Why does he want “magic sticky shoes”? What does he wish they could help with?

pp. 204–218

- How did the COVID-19 pandemic make Finn’s dad’s death even more complicated for his family?
- Explain Finn’s comparison of a false summit to tough times.
- How have the hikes become different for Finn after finding Edna’s letters to his dad?
- What kind of miracle is Finn cooking up?

pp. 219–235

- Reread the definition of “sacrifice” on p. 228. What has Finn sacrificed? His dad? What was the price of being a hero?
- Why is Finn confused to find his father’s ashes in the box in his mom’s closet?

pp. 236–260

- What other problems have become bigger or more important to Finn than his missing poetry assignment?
- How has Finn of August 24 changed from Finn of May 28 (the start of the book)?
- Did it surprise you that Finn decided to down-climb to help Coach on Saddleback? Why or why not?

pp. 261–282

- What do you think Finn means when he says his dad’s ashes are just an ounce or two per bag, but it’s a weight he promises you’d notice?
- What does Finn realize at the swimming hole on the Lake Arnold Trail? How and why does this memory matter for Finn?

pp. 283–295

- What is the difference between feeling lucky and feeling grateful? Why does Finn describe himself as grateful?
- Why does Finn have such a hard time with changes in plans?
- What did Finn learn from the toxicology report? Was it what he expected or something different?
- Do you agree with Finn’s position about his father and who or what he cared about? Why or why not?

pp. 296–313

- Why did Finn climb Esther and Whiteface without Sam? Why did he lie to his mom about it?
- What does Finn find to be true about grief when hiking in the mountains? How has hiking impacted Finn’s grief?
- Finn describes Seymour as “*a dog that’s stayed by my side.*” Why is it significant that this canine friend has been on this journey with him?
- What do you think happened between the end of Finn’s poem and the ranger’s report?

pp. 314–327

- What actually happened between the end of Finn’s poem and the ranger report?
- What makes Finn feel guilty when he awakens at the hospital?
- Why is it so hard for Finn to recall what happened between Seymour and the bear?
- What did Finn realize about his mom’s experience?

pp. 328–345

- What surprises you from Finn’s letter to Edna? Why?
- What was in the box Kelly delivered?
- What is the significance of Kelly’s tattoo? What new information about Kelly does Finn learn? How does that affect his empathy for Kelly? His dad?

pp. 346–352

- What difference did it make for Finn to have his dad’s letters to Edna?
- Compare the poem “The Trouble with Heroes II” (p. 348) to the original “The Trouble with Heroes” (p. 153). What is different between the two poems? What has Finn realized? How has he grown and changed?

## For More Discussion

Revisit the definition of the word “hero” on p. 14.

- What word stands out to you in the definition as being most important or central to explaining who a hero is or what a hero is or does? Why?
- Why might someone aspire to be a hero? What would be desirable about being seen by others in that light? What challenges and/or sacrifices potentially come with being a hero? How do the two sides (pros and cons) balance?
- In your opinion, is there too much pressure on some individuals or occupations to be “heroes”?

While hiking the practice hike on Gill Brook Trail with Finn, Kelly says, “*Have I mentioned that these mountains / are full of metaphors?*” (p. 72). A metaphor is a figure of speech that describes what something is like by comparing it to something else with similar characteristics. When Kelly mentions this to Finn, she is talking about a sign at a fork in the trail that points to two directions, one “easy” and the other “scenic,” which could also apply to life. What other examples from Finn’s time in the mountains can you remember or track that are great metaphors for life? (There are a lot of them!)

Compare and contrast the roles of firefighters and other emergency personnel during 9/11 and COVID-19, especially in New York City. (Support students in building additional background knowledge as needed, resources below.) How were the two historic events similar in what they demanded from these heroes? What was different? What impact did these events have on the families and loved ones of emergency personnel? Were those mostly the same or more different?

On the Saddleback Cliffs, Coach tells Finn,

*“Some things are just tough  
and there’s no way around  
the hard parts.  
Only through.  
Sometimes there’s no good path—  
just a bad way and a worse way—  
so you might as well choose one  
and get started.”* (p. 256)

How do you think Finn felt to hear this from Coach? How might Coach have been trying to be helpful? Reread the poem “Coaching the Coach” starting on p. 254. What do you think Coach is referring to in this passage? When do you think this could be true? What else could it apply to?

## Enrichment Activities

### The Adirondacks

Explore the Adirondacks. Some great virtual options include:

- [High Peaks: The Official Adirondack Website](#), managed by Adirondack Regional Tourism, is a great place to find a listing of all 46 peaks and their heights, if you want to incorporate any computation or problem solving especially. This site also includes advice and information about hiking preparedness.
- [AllTrails](#) is where Finn sourced many of his Found Poems, and you can use that resource, too. It includes trail reviews and images.
- [Peakery](#) is intended to be used as a tool to help hikers track their challenges, and it’s also an interesting site for poking around at the locations of the mountains in relation to one another and includes crowdsourced images from hikers’ summits that will give your students a look at the views from those respective trails, too.

Find out more about Grace Hudowalski, the woman who was the true inspiration for the character of Edna Grace Thomas. You can begin in Kate Messner’s Author’s Note and then learn more about Grace broadly on the internet or via the Adirondack 46er website.

- Who was Grace Hudowalski? What connections can you find between Grace’s real life and the character Messner created, Edna Grace Thomas?
- How did Messner keep this novel true to the spirit of Grace Hudowalski in writing Finn’s journey?

### Hiking Dogs

Conduct some research. Would all dogs do well on hikes in mountain terrain? What characteristics might make one canine friend better suited to hiking adventures than another? Which dogs are involved in mountain rescue teams? Which breeds of dog are the best match for an avid hiker?

### Anatomy of a Backpack

Make a list of necessary equipment and supplies to be prepared for a hike in the Adirondacks with Finn. Gather those items and a hiking backpack to “pack” and then try on the pack to feel its heft. Consider adding small weights to represent some of Finn’s additional pressures, e.g., grief, worry about the shop, unfinished poetry project, etc.



Variation: Provide students with a template of a backpack shape and encourage them to create an artistic representation of the contents of Finn’s backpack, both literal and figurative. How and where do the worries and stressors Finn experiences fit in and around the things he needs to bring to be prepared?

### **Cookies and Baking**

Choose your favorite of Finn’s Trail Cookie recipes to try. Or, team up with friends and share the baking duties. Then come together for a taste test of the Adirondacks . . . or the cookie version, anyway!

Get creative in the kitchen yourself. Go out for a hike (or a walk) in a nature area where you live. Then, let your experience inspire you! How could you represent what you saw or heard or felt in nature with baking ingredients? Remember: Finn used all kinds of things, from chocolate chips to orange peels to peanut butter cups to Heath bars! (Visit p. 100 if you need a reminder.)

### **Poetry**

Ms. Garcia’s 7th Grade poetry assignment “What Makes a Hero?” (p. 7) is for students to write at least twenty poems about people they consider to be heroes. Try a variation of this assignment with fewer poems, or choose a specific form(s) from Ms. G’s list to try.

Ms. Garcia encourages the students to use poetic devices like alliteration, onomatopoeia, similes, and metaphors in their poetry project. Can you spot these poetic devices throughout Kate Messner’s poetry in *The Trouble with Heroes*? Hints about pages to visit to get you started:

Alliteration:	p. 133 “ <i>blue-bodied</i> ” / “ <i>quiet clear</i> ”
	P. 165 “ <i>beech leaves and birch bark and blackbirds and beavers and blah-blah-blah butterfly</i> ”
Onomatopoeia:	p. 74 “ <i>Thwack!</i> ”
Similes:	p. 13 “ <i>The last weeks of school are as pointless / as end-of-June pencils</i> ”
	p. 157 “ <i>but kept coming back / like the mountains were magnets and he was steel</i> ”
Metaphors:	p. 27 “ <i>the weight of all that gear. / All that’s happened these last two years.</i> ”

	p. 212-213 “The trail. / On the other side of the clearing / that you thought was the summit / but isn’t. ... When you’re slogging through something so tough / you should at least get to know / where it ends.”
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Play with perspective. Finn narrates his own story, except for when he imagines what another character is thinking about him or the trail adventure they share. For example, on p. 143, he pens a poem as though he is Seymour—from a dog’s point of view. Pick one of the trail hikes, and rewrite the poem from the perspective of Seymour, or one of the other 46ers who hiked with Finn (Annie, Sam, Coach, or Kelly), or even Finn’s mom. How do the details change from another person’s point of view?

### **September 11, 2001**

Young people have a sincere curiosity about this historic event. We can help them to build background knowledge in a trauma-sensitive way by guiding them to developmentally appropriate and accurate accounts of September 11 history. The National September 11 Memorial & Museum website has many useful features to deepen both student and educator understanding. Additionally, the National Education Association has compiled a resource page with lesson ideas and materials to support educators in approaching the topic with mindfulness.

- National September 11 Memorial & Museum:
  - <https://www.911memorial.org/>
- National Education Association (NEA):
  - <https://www.nea.org/professional-excellence/student-engagement/tools-tips/teaching-about-911>

### **The Survivor Tree**

Read more about The Survivor Tree, or Kelly’s tattoo, in one of these picture books:

- *Branches of Hope: The 9/11 Survivor Tree*, by Ann Magee, illustrated by Nicole Wong, 2021
- *Survivor Tree*, by Marcie Colleen, illustrated by Aaron Becker, 2021
- *This Very Tree: A Story of 9/11, Resilience, and Regrowth*, by Sean Rubin, 2021

### **Choose Your Own Adventure (or Disaster!)**

Try your hand at your own Choose Your Own Adventure–style writing. Similar to the way Finn wrote some parts of his storytelling about himself and George Cheney, Choose Your Own Adventure stories have part of the narrative written, and the reader gets a choice about what happens next. Depending on the reader’s choice, they go to a certain page and continue reading from there. It can be really tricky to keep track of the storylines!

Variation: Try to write short pieces with only one “right answer” like Finn did. Use the examples on pp. 39–41 and pp. 269–271 to help!

### **Goals & Goal Setting**

Though Finn’s goal was initially decided for him by Kelly, summiting all 46 Adirondack High Peaks by Labor Day was a big goal for his summer. Kelly helped Finn distill his why—the reason behind WHY he wanted to achieve this goal—(so that he would not have to buy a new headstone to replace the one he damaged) and anticipated some of the possible obstacles by helping prepare him with equipment and mentor hikers. However, Finn ultimately had to do the work to accomplish his goal. What goal do you aspire to accomplish? How can you make a plan and get started? Think about these same steps:

1. Choose a goal.
2. Reflect on and name your “why.”
3. Set smaller, short-term goals to help you work toward the ultimate goal.
4. Anticipate possible obstacles and roadblocks. Who can help you when you get stuck?

### **Grounding Exercises**

Grounding exercises are intended to help a person feel more calm and centered by focusing on the present moment and their body. In *The Trouble with Heroes*, Finn recalls a grounding exercise his family would practice when PTSD made things hard for his dad: 5-4-3-2-1. They would name 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste.

Some other possible grounding exercises you can try include:

- Progressive Muscle Relaxation: This might look like physically tightening the muscles in your fists, noticing the feeling of those tensed muscles, and then releasing them or working your way through the muscle groups in your body, beginning with your toes and working your way up to your shoulders and neck.
- Square Breathing (or Box Breathing): Inhale, filling your lungs for a count of four. Hold that breath for a count of four. Exhale for a count of four. Rest or relax for a count of four before beginning again. Envision a square or box as you take each step, or trace something square (like a sticky note) with your finger if that is more helpful.
- Butterfly Hug: Hug yourself by crossing your arms over your chest with your hands on your collarbone. Your fingers should point to your shoulders. Tap alternately on each shoulder with your fingertips while taking deep breaths.

## **An Interview with the Author: Kate Messner**



***The Trouble with Heroes* is a novel-in-verse, which sets it apart from your other (equally remarkable) middle grade novels. What about this character and/or story made you feel a verse novel would be the best fit for telling the story?**

**KM:** The short answer to this question is “That’s just how it started coming out.” But even though that’s true, I know it’s not a good enough reason to choose the structure of a story, so I had to ask myself that question. Why verse? Was poetry really the best way to tell this story? The more time I spent with Finn, the more I realized that it was. Poetry leaves space for emotions. It holds a place for grief. Also, poems are often snapshots of a moment, the way memories are, and that seemed fitting, too.

**How did the details of Finn’s dad’s, Noah Connelly’s, heroic life make their way into the story? As a firefighter in New York, he is in the epicenter of two fairly recent historic events. Did you know he would play a role in both September 11 and the COVID-19 pandemic from the beginning?**

**KM:** This book took a very long time to write, and this is one of the reasons why. I had the idea for a kid who vandalized a cemetery and was forced to climb the High Peaks, and I’d started scribbling poems before I confronted the emotional truth of the story. What makes someone commit that particular act of vandalism? It had to be grief, I decided, and then I had to spend a lot more time with Finn, writing in character and waiting for his real story to emerge.

**You share in the Author’s Note that you are an Adirondack 46er, having summited all 46 High Peaks yourself. If you were going to be a hiking buddy to a young reader of *The Trouble with Heroes* (like Annie, Sam, or Coach), what bit of advice from your own experiences and self-discovery on the trails would you most want to offer them?**

**KM:** That sometimes, big things feel impossible when we think about how big they are. But if you can just put one foot in front of the other, you can make it to the next trail marker. And then the next, and the next. Hiking is like that, and life is, too.

**Finally, what happens to Finn? Will Finn keep hiking? Keep writing?**

**KM:** I think that both hiking and writing can help you find yourself. Finn’s done that, to some degree. But for me, at least, they’re also both activities that help us put things in perspective and make sense of the world. I think Finn’s discovered that, too, so I don’t think he’ll be giving up either anytime soon.

## **Resources for Talking with Students about Grief and Loss**

**Sites:****[The Dougy Center](#)**

The Dougy Center for Grieving Children is rich with resources for a wide range of scenarios and ages, including resources specific to COVID-19-related deaths.

**[Good Grief](#)**

Good Grief is a nonprofit in New Jersey, and their site has a variety of resources including PDFs, planners, printable activities, and webinar videos. Resources specific to COVID-19-related deaths also included.

**Articles:**

*Creating a Grief and Trauma-Informed Classroom* from Good Grief

<https://goodgrief0538.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Creating-a-Grief-and-Trauma-Informed-Classroom1.pdf>

*Helping Children Deal with Grief* from Child Mind Institute

<https://childmind.org/article/helping-children-deal-grief/>

*The Teacher's Role When Tragedy Strikes* from Child Mind Institute

<https://childmind.org/article/teachers-role-tragedy-strikes/>

**Picture Books:**

*Cape*, by Kevin Johnson, illustrated by Kitt Thomas, 2023

*Grief is an Elephant*, by Tamara Ellis Smith & Nancy Whitesides, 2023

*Maybe Tomorrow?* by Charlotte Agell, illustrated by Ana Ramírez González, 2019

*The Remember Balloons*, by Jessie Oliveros, illustrated by Dana Wulfekotte, 2018

*The Rough Patch* by Brian Lies, 2018

*A Shelter for Sadness*, by Anne Booth, illustrated by David Litchfield, 2021

*A Walk in the Woods*, by Nikki Grimes, illustrated by Jerry Pinkney and Brian Pinkney, 2023

**Other Novels:**

*All the Blues in the Sky*, by Renée Watson, 2025

*Mid-Air*, by Alicia D. Williams, 2024