

American Witch Story Book Club for Adults

“A Witch’s Guide to Escape: A Practical Compendium of Portal Fantasies”

By Alix E. Harrow

Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree with the librarian's choice in the end, to help a troubled teenager leave this world for a different one? Although she wants to help him, she enables the disappearance of a boy. Was it the right decision? What were some alternatives?
2. Why do you think the librarian broke the rules in order to help the boy, even though she may lose everything — her sisterhood of witches, libraries, and stories themselves? Do you really think she will be punished so harshly?
3. Where do you think the boy went? Did you like the ending? Was it too abrupt, just right?
4. What would you have changed about the story? Do you think a short story was the right length for this tale, or could it have been well-developed as a novel?
5. What did you enjoy most about the book? The least?
6. Do you often read fantasy stories? What did you think about this story?
7. Can you read out a quote that really resonated with you? Explain why you identify with it.
8. What do you think of the title of the story?
9. What are your impressions of libraries? What have your experiences with libraries been like? Do you think libraries are magical places?
10. What do you think about librarians in general? Can you imagine librarians as witches?
11. What did you think about the magical elements of the story? For example, the books that seemed to be conscious, noticing library patrons and communicating amongst themselves; throwing themselves off library carts at readers?
12. The boy’s social worker tells him that he needs to stop reading so much fantasy and instead face his problems head-on, “rather than running away from them.” The librarian disagrees, saying, “Anyone could see that kid needed to run and keep running until he shed his own skin, until he clawed out of the choking darkness and unfurled his wings, precious and prismatic in the light of some other world.” Who is correct?
13. “*A Witch’s Guide to Escape: A Practical Compendium of Portal Fantasies* has no words in it at all, but only pages and pages of maps: hand-drawn Middle Earth knock-offs with unpronounceable names; medieval tapestry-maps showing tiny ships sailing off the edge of the world; topographical maps of Machu Picchu; 1970s Rand McNally street maps of Istanbul.” What’s the connection between maps and stories?
14. The librarian says, “We give people the books they need, except when we don’t. Except when they need them most.” What do you make of this idea?