

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

### ABOUT THE BOOK

Fifteen-year-old Ry finds himself stranded in the middle of Montana when the train carrying him to summer camp suddenly, and somewhat unexpectedly, takes off without him. With the help of strangers, Ry makes his way back home to Wisconsin . . . and then on to the Caribbean to rendezvous with his vacationing parents. With characteristic wit and insight, Lynne Rae Perkins explores both the invisible forces—fate, chance, and serendipity—and the visible ones—family ties and friendship—that bind us together.

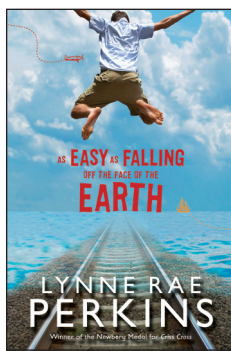
## A CONVERSATION WITH LYNNE RAE PERKINS

### **What inspired you to tell Ry's story in *As Easy as Falling Off the Face of the Earth*?**

When our son, Frank, was fourteen years old, I found myself thinking that he would enjoy knowing a very good friend of ours, an adventurous and moderately eccentric character named Del. This was not possible, though; Del had died when Frank was only two. I decided to try to introduce them to each other anyway, by imagining someone *like* Frank meeting someone *like* Del. An adventure ensued. I was on the edge of my seat. I didn't know what would happen in the last chapter until the day I wrote it.

### **Luck plays a significant role throughout the novel. Do you believe in luck? Have you experienced luck, either good or bad, in your own life?**

"Luck" is another word for "chance"—it's what we call chance when it happens to us, personally. Then it becomes "good luck" or "bad luck." I have had both kinds. Somewhere in between is the kind of luck, or chance, that can go either way, depending on what you decide to do with it. That is the area that is most interesting to me.



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## A CONVERSATION WITH LYNNE RAE PERKINS (CONTINUED)

**Ry is helped by the kindness of strangers. In what ways have you experienced the kindness of strangers in your life? When have you been the kind stranger?**

Having an unreliable car can be an avenue to the kindness of strangers. One of my most memorable of these encounters took place years ago, when my Pacer—that car that looked like a spaceship—died, for the umpteenth time, in a down-and-out area of the city. The car had enough momentum to drift over to the curb, in front of a down-and-out apartment building where two down-and-out-looking fellows (stereotype alert!) sat on the stoop, observing.

It was before the era of cell phones. The men approached my car. I felt nervous, vulnerable. One of them went to a gas station and brought gas back for me; the other went inside and got glasses of water. We chatted on the stoop while we waited for the gas. (I wasn't actually out of gas, it was an undiagnosed carburetor/fuel filter thing, but if I let the car sit for a while and/or added gas, it would run again. For a while.)

I expected hostility or indifference; they showed me kindness. I learned something important that day about making assumptions.

Most kindnesses are small. Most strangers are only semi-strangers, or strangers briefly. Kindness, friendliness even, is like a secret renegade movement against hatefulness and people who like to hear themselves shout. And it's more fun. So there.

Whatever kindnesses I commit myself are not so dramatic. Probably the most frequent ones involve making food and listening to people. But I try to keep a kindness vibe going—I hope I am doing kind things without even knowing it. That's the best way.

**You seem to have a remarkable kinship with dogs. How did that come about, and how do you write from the canine perspective?**

Dogs are pretty easy to have a remarkable kinship with. Our current dog, Lucky, insists that we take long vigorous hikes in the woods, in all kinds of weather ("Coach Lucky"), where he occasionally takes pauses that make us stop, too, and look at what is all around us ("Guru Lucky"). Even though we grumble and don't want to leave the house, we are glad afterwards that we did. When he goes off on a wild tear, running through the town and countryside eluding capture, he returns confident that we will forgive him almost right away, which we do, and that makes us feel good about ourselves. He doesn't speak, himself, but he seems to take such interest in what we say to him. And he is warm and furry.

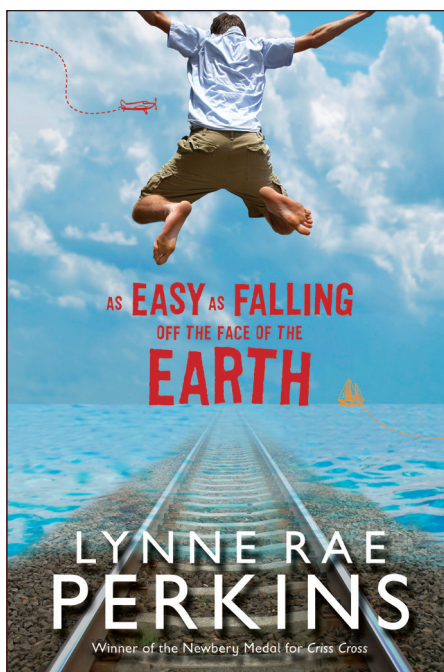
I like cats, too, but we don't have one at the moment.

**What do you most hope readers will take away from *As Easy as Falling Off the Face of the Earth*?**

Hmmmm . . . what a great question (stalling technique). I would love it if readers came away thinking, life on Earth, in the real world, is so dang interesting. Especially if you step off the train, whatever that might mean, metaphorically speaking.

**Isn't Ry's name a homonym for "wry," indicating dry humor, as well as "rai," the hybrid of Arabic and Algerian folk music with western rock, the name coming from the phrase "ha er-ray" (frequently found in the songs) meaning, "That's the thinking, here is the view"? And doesn't Delwyn's name mean "proud friend"?**

Why yes, that's true (thanks to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* and *100,000 Baby Names*). Though I wouldn't put too much weight on that.

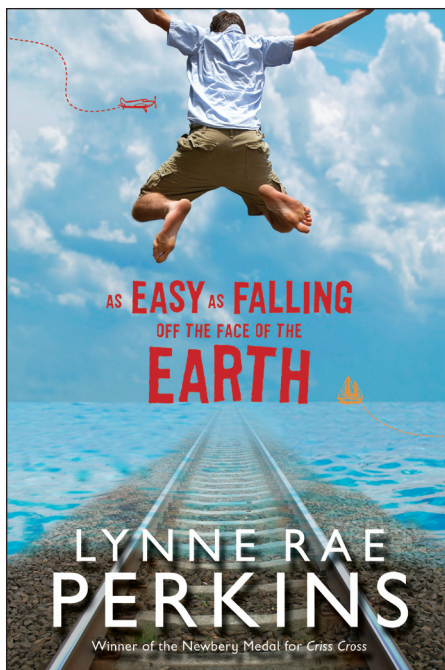


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## DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. The novel occasionally references the book's omniscient narrator (pages 71, 317). Discuss what an omniscient narrator is and what impact it has on this story.
2. "The shoes were a metaphor for the decline of western civilization: crappy and glitzy and barely useful, but pretty comfortable" (page 71). What makes this metaphor effective? Find and discuss other examples of metaphors and similes from the book.
3. Locate and discuss examples of humor from the text. What makes them effective? How would you describe Perkins's sense of humor?
4. Perkins employs a variety of illustrations: some complement the narrative by illustrating the text, some carry the story forward on their own, and some provide editorial comment. Discuss how the visual elements of the book mesh with the text.
5. The main thrust of the plot follows Ry and his adventures, but the story also gives glimpses of other viewpoints—the dogs', the parents', and the grandfather's. How do these multiple storylines affect the overall story? Do you wish that any secondary storyline was more prominent?
6. Discuss some of the kind, selfless things that Del does for various people. What do you think makes him tick? What insight does his personality offer about human nature?
7. What are some "invisible and visible forces" that "could pull you back," and how do they operate in the novel (page 350)?
8. "Maybe the more people you put in your family, the better. Like a diversified investment portfolio" (pages 350–51). How does the truth of this statement play out in the novel?
9. Despite having a cell phone, Ry ironically is unable to make contact with his family and friends in an emergency. Discuss how modern technology aids and impedes communication.
10. Beginning in "The Lighthouse Keeper of Maceta" chapter, Spanish appears first in the dialogue and then bleeds into the narrative as a sort of pidgin language. Discuss the effect this has on the reader, and how it ties into the themes of the novel.
11. Truth is stranger than fiction, as the old saying goes, but this fiction is pretty strange—it's rife with coincidences. Discuss the role this element plays in the story.
12. In Perkins's previous novels, *All Alone in the Universe* and *Criss Cross*, the characters remain in one setting but undertake vast emotional journeys. In contrast, *As Easy as Falling Off the Face of the Earth* is something of a road trip novel. How does Ry grow and change over the course of the story? How does his interior journey mirror his physical one?
13. The title of the book comes from the poem that Del writes for Yulia (pages 307–8). Why do you think this title suits the book? If you could choose an alternate title, what would it be?





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## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. **Epistolary Poem.** Del writes a poem for Yulia that expresses some important feelings that he can never quite tell her (pages 307–8). Choose someone from your life who is important to you and write a poem for him or her, expressing your true feelings.
2. **Map Quest.** Using a map of the United States and the Caribbean, plot the course of Ry's journey using pushpins to mark his stops and yarn to mark his route. Make captions for each pushpin that summarize and encapsulate the main points of the story.
3. **Model Airplane.** Everett builds and flies his own plane, much to Ry's amazement—and terror. You may not be able to build an airplane, but you can gain a real appreciation for Everett's mechanical ability by buying, constructing, and flying a model airplane.
4. **Picture Perfect.** Study the various illustrations in the novel to get an idea of the quirky style Perkins employs in her drawings. Then pick your favorite scene from the novel and draw an illustration to accompany it. Experiment with different formats, including comics, diagrams, and loose sketches.
5. **Sailing Sleuth.** On page 250, the omniscient narrator teases the reader about not knowing sailing terminology. Research various sailing vessels and their parts. Draw diagrams, label them, and include a glossary that defines unknown words.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Lynne Rae Perkins** is the acclaimed children's book author of *Criss Cross*, winner of the Newbery Medal, and its companion, *All Alone in the Universe*, an ALA Notable Book. *As Easy as Falling Off the Face of the Earth* is her first book for teens. She has also written and illustrated six picture books, including *Snow Music* and *Home Lovely*, both *Boston Globe–Horn Book* Honor Books, as well as *The Cardboard Piano*, *Pictures from Our Vacation*, *The Broken Cat*, and *Clouds for Dinner*. Lynne Rae Perkins lives with her family in northern Michigan.

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Discussion guide created by Jonathan Hunt, library media teacher, Modesto, California. 03/10