

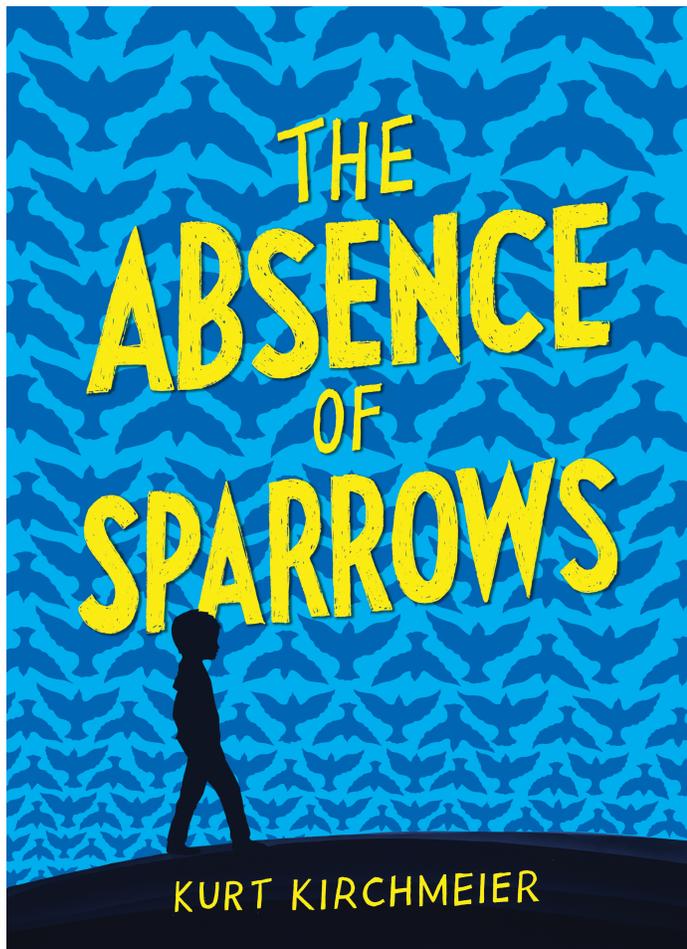
# MEDIA KIT/DISCUSSION GUIDE

"A powerful piece of storytelling... Will resonate with anyone who understands that heroism is not a matter of saving the world but of maintaining yourself, and acting to protect those in your community-- despite the forces arrayed against you."

—Quill and Quire, starred review



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LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY  
BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kurt Kirchmeier is a Saskatchewan-based writer who has always been drawn to books with heart and a strong sense of mystery and wonder. He has a soft spot for speculative fiction and coming-of-age stories. When he isn't reading or writing, he enjoys spending time outdoors and connecting with nature. He's an avid photographer, and has a particular fondness for birds.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

- Web site: [www.kurtkirchmeier.net](http://www.kurtkirchmeier.net)
- Twitter: [@saskwriter](https://twitter.com/saskwriter)
- Instagram: [kurtkirchmeier](https://www.instagram.com/kurtkirchmeier)
- Flickr / Nature Photography: [Kirchmeier](https://www.flickr.com/photos/kurtkirchmeier/)
- For rights information or queries concerning projects, please contact Ali Herring at Spencerhill Associates at [aherring@spencerhillassociates.com](mailto:aherring@spencerhillassociates.com).
- For film and television rights, Kurt is represented by Mary Pender-Coplan at United Talent Agency. Please contact Mary at [penderm@unitedtalent.com](mailto:penderm@unitedtalent.com)
- For other requests, please use the website contact form.



# THE ABSENCE OF SPARROWS

- Author: Kurt Kirchmeier  
(pronounced "Kirsh-Meyer")
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for Young Readers
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Horror
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## EDITORIAL REVIEWS

"A powerful piece of storytelling... Will resonate with anyone who understands that heroism is not a matter of saving the world but of maintaining yourself, and acting to protect those in your community--despite the forces arrayed against you."

—**Quill and Quire, starred review**

"The mystery of the 'glass plague,' the constant threats to Ben and his family, and the fast-moving plot make the book hard to put down.... Sure to be popular with readers seeking a truly scary story."

—**School Library Journal**

"Will stick with the reader long after they are finished."

—**School Library Connection**

"This gripping novel trusts its young readers."

—**Booklist**

"Stephen King-level horror haunting a tight, thoughtful domestic drama."

—**BCCB**

"Gripping and affecting."

—**Shelf Awareness**

"Creepy and engaging."

—**Publishers Weekly**

"Narrator Will Collyer brings realistic emotion to this creepy audiobook about a terrifying plague."

—**AudioFile**

"A fresh spin on the post-apocalyptic genre.... A thought-provoking read."

—**Canadian Children's Book News**

## BOOK EXCERPT

“It’s spreading,” I heard Pete say. And it was.

From his hand to his wrist and then right up his sleeve—by the time my brain even registered what was happening, the blackness had claimed his whole arm and part of his neck above his collar, and it didn’t stop there.”

Mr. Crandall opened his mouth as if to cry out, but it was already too late; the darkness had seized his vocal cords. A moment later the transformation was complete.

George Crandall stood frozen in place, an obsidian statue dressed in an old wool suit with patches on the elbows. A crow flew down to land on the statue’s head. It cawed twice and then silently flew off south.



## SUMMARY

In the small town of Griever’s Mill and across the world, strange dark clouds begin to roll in, transforming not only the sky, but also those on the ground beneath it. For young Ben Cameron, this isn’t just a premature end to what he had hoped would be a summer of bird watching; it might well spell the end of his childhood. First, he sees old man Crandall turn to glass in the street, and then his dad becomes solid obsidian at the dining room table. Now Ben fears he’ll lose his mom to a total breakdown if the Glass Plague doesn’t take her first. To make matters worse, his brother is being brainwashed by a voice on the radio who not only claims to have answers about the plague, but also a plan to stop it. The only problem is, the plan requires a sacrifice Ben isn’t sure he can make—especially now that he’s come up with a theory involving sparrows and crows and his father’s potential return. And so with the clock counting down to a global deadline for ‘the shattering,’ and the soul-stealing, hell-on-earth darkness of the plague threatening to become absolute, Ben and his brother will each pick a side—with both their father and humanities’ fates hanging in the balance.

# AUTHOR Q & A

## **1. How did you come to write *The Absence of Sparrows*?**

I first got the idea for this story from a dream I had of my own father turning to obsidian. I originally explored the concept in a piece of short fiction, which was published in a magazine in Ireland in 2009. I thought that would be the end of it, but the two brothers from that story stayed with me, their relationship continuing to deepen in my imagination until finally I decided I needed to give them a larger stage. Books like *Boy's Life* by Robert McCammon and *Dandelion Wine* by Ray Bradbury inspired me to make it a coming-of-age story, and my own love of birds inspired me to make the main character a birder as well.

## **2. You have a soft spot for writing about boys who are open and sensitive. Why is important to you to portray these kinds of characters?**

I think sensitive boys often feel trapped inside their own minds. They're made to feel like they can't express themselves openly without risking ridicule. This is often why they turn to books, and why it's important for them to be able to see themselves in the characters they're reading about. It makes them feel less invisible and misunderstood. I also think that the thing we need most in the world right now is empathy, and I believe the only path to empathy is through openness and sensitivity.

## **3. Early reviewers have commented that *The Absence of Sparrows* isn't only a book for children. Why do you think your middle grade book is finding an audience with adults as well?**

My book might incorporate many childhood norms like climbing trees and skipping stones and dressing up as ninjas, but there are heavy and complex themes that arise as a result of the glass plague. In a lot of ways, the story has one foot firmly in childhood and the other one stepping out of it. I think grown-ups will connect with the mature ideas while also experiencing nostalgia for everything else. Similarly, kids will relate to the childhood norms and enjoy the fantastical suspense while also feeling that they can reach deeper if they're ready to.

## **4. *The Absence of Sparrows* deals with grief and an unstable world. Why do you think books like this are important and meaningful for children today?**

I think that the connectedness of modern life and the reality of an endless news cycle with a strong negativity bias exposes kids to a lot of things that previous generations weren't exposed to. Kids are learning at a younger age just how unstable the world really is. I think books that deal with grief and other hard emotions can help readers process and cope with what they are feeling, and if the book also happens to provide some escapist fun or goosebump-inducing thrills, all the better.

## **5. You were a short-fiction writer who had a number of horror pieces published prior to *The Absence of Sparrows* being acquired. With the recent spate of middle grade horror novel acquisitions, what do you think is important for new readers of the genre to understand as they dive into your book and the genre in general?**

I think horror offers a unique experience to young readers, not only because the stories provide them with a safe way to explore their fears, but also because a lot of what makes horror great is left to the imagination of the reader. It offers glimpses behind the curtain and into the darkness, but rarely is everything fully revealed. I think a good thing for a new reader of the genre to keep in mind is that horror operates on our fears of the unknown.

## **6. School Library Journal called *The Absence of Sparrows* the "most frightening young YA fantasy since Kenneth Oppel's *The Nest*." With the popularity of *Stranger Things*, which your novel was comped to, why do you think today's generation of kids are so comfortable with the horror genre?**

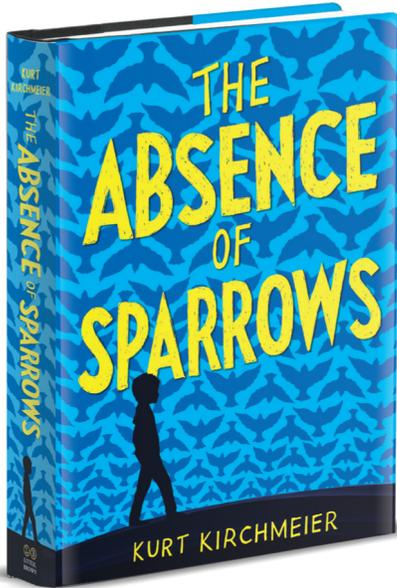
I think access to these sorts of books might be less limited than it once was, but honestly, I feel like kids have always been comfortable with the genre. There's a reason they mess around with Ouija boards, brave thrill rides, and play Bloody Mary in the bathroom with their friends. Kids like a good scare now and then, and in a lot of ways, I think they are the best audience of all for scary books, because they haven't lost their sense of wonder when it comes to the strange and unexplained. They're deeply curious about such things.

## **7. You survived a home invasion on Christmas Eve when you were 10 years old. How did this childhood experience with trauma influence your writing?**

My childhood was full of instability, and that definitely informs my writing, but the thing about a traumatic incident like that is, it destroys your sense of security in the world, and once that's gone, there's no getting it back. It's no coincidence that I now write apocalyptic stories about kids who have lost, or are in the process of losing, their own sense of security, which then forces them to grow up too soon.

## **8. You're an avid nature photographer with a particular fondness for birds. How does your love of nature influence your writing?**

I think that my love for nature affects how the characters I write about see the world. In some ways, it makes them more aware of the connectedness of all things, and provides them with an additional lens through which to contemplate their reality, much like Ben contemplates and contrasts bird behavior with human behavior and draws conclusions from not only the similarities, but also the differences.



## Book Club Guide

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Throughout the book Ben describes the ways in which different species of birds have adapted over time to better survive. What are some other examples you can think of where animals have evolved to fit their surroundings? How does the town of Griever's Mill adapt to the new reality of the glass plague?
2. How does each member of the Cameron family cope with Ben's dad's glassification? How do you think you would handle such an event?
3. Ben describes being a little brother as being "like a satellite instead of a planet in your own right" (p. 160). How does Ben and Pete's relationship change over the course of the book? If you have siblings, how does your relationship with them compare to Ben and Pete's?
4. Ben laments that he and Pete "should have been gluing together model airplanes or doing cannonballs at the pool" instead of dealing with the glass plague (p. 247). In what ways does Ben take on more adult characteristics? What parts of childhood does he manage to hold on to?
5. Ben and Pete encounter the Messam brothers, Lester and Lars, several times. What initially makes the Messam brothers so intimidating to Ben? By the end of the book, how and why has Ben's perception of the brothers changed?
6. Who or what do you think the voice on the radio represents? Why is Pete so compelled by the voice?
7. Ben's mom struggles with anxiety. How does the rest of the family help Ben's mom deal with her anxiety? What do you think anxiety feels like based on Ben's mom's behavior?
8. The Cameron family approach their faith in different ways. What role does faith play in each of their lives? How does their faith impact their reactions to the glass plague?
9. How does the glass plague compare to real world natural disasters such as hurricanes or blizzards? How do the people of Griever's Mill prepare for future glassifications?
10. Ben remarks that "Nobody talked about the shattering... Life simply went on" (p. 371). Do you think the shattering worked? What theories do you have for what happened to the people who turned to glass? How do the images of sparrows and crows in the book relate to the glass plague?

