

# BOOKNOTES

READERS GUIDE

## thematic connections

**Censorship • Values in  
Conflict • Courage • Religion**

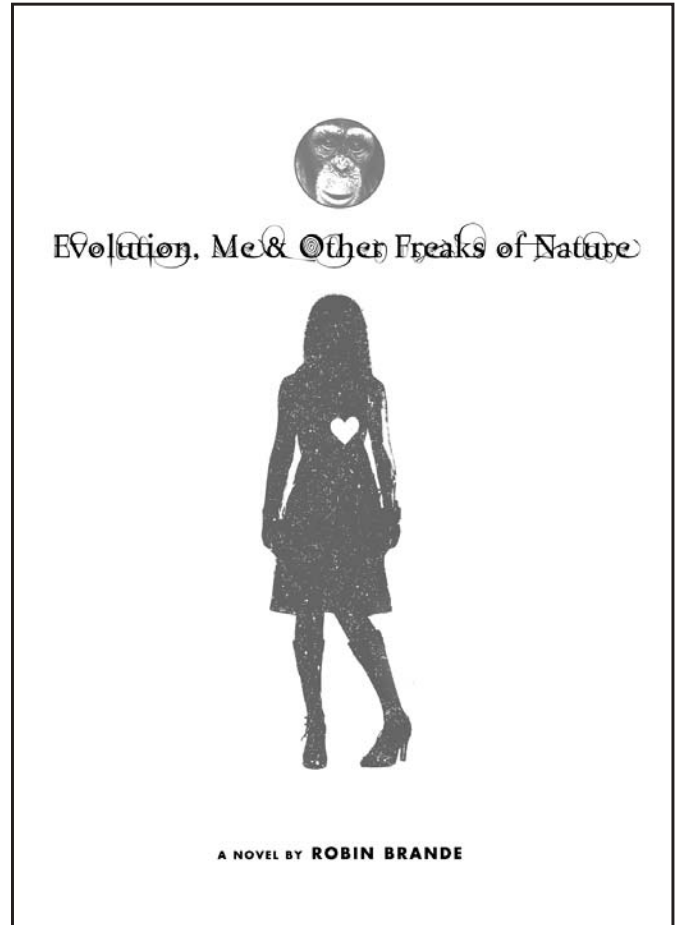
**Grades 7 up**

## about the book

**Ninth-grader Mena Reece finds herself embroiled in a scandal that forever changes her ideas about God, Darwin, parents, best friends, charismatic pastors, nerdy science lab partners, *The Lord of the Rings*, and courageous teachers. But to repair her fractured life, will she have to make a final choice?**

Mena Reece faces a lonely ninth-grade year. All of her old anchors—her best friends, her parents, and her church—have left her adrift after she sends a letter of support to an injured classmate. Mena knows she’s done the right thing, but all the same, her year looks bleak. Next Mena is assigned to Ms. Shepherd’s science class where she is partnered with Casey Connor, a science geek. This partnership, however, soon leads to a special friendship and an intellectual awakening for Mena. When Rev. Wells, the pastor of Paradise Christian church, leads a protest against Ms. Shepherd for teaching evolution, Mena learns about the importance of academic freedom, friendship, courage, and passion. Through it all, Mena remains religious and finds creative means to draw connections between the Bible and science.

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Alfred A. Knopf HC: 978-0-375-84349-5 (0-375-84349-3)

GLB: 978-0-375-94349-2 (0-375-94349-8)

Listening Library CD: 978-0-7393-5056-0 (0-7393-5056-0)

**“Nothing is easier than to  
admit in words the truth  
of the universal struggle for life.”**

—Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*



## pre-reading activity

Have readers search for articles that deal with issues related to evolution vs. creationism. Ask them to share the articles with the group and discuss why this debate has resurfaced in recent years.

Analyze the following quotes, and ask readers to think about them as they read the novel:

**“Sin lies only in hurting others unnecessarily. All other ‘sins’ are invented nonsense.”**

—Robert Heinlein

**“It is impossible for ideas to compete in the marketplace if no forum for their presentation is provided or available.”**

—Thomas Mann



# questions

- Discuss why Mena feels compelled to write a letter to Denny Pierce. Debate whether she thought her actions would affect her friends and family. Discuss the motivation behind her parents' reaction.
- How do Mena's parents use religion to punish her? Why do they feel there is value in this particular type of punishment? Why doesn't it occur to her parents to allow her to attend another church?
- Describe Mena's friendship with Teresa and Bethany before they severed ties at the end of their eighth-grade year. How does Mena feel betrayed by the girls? Though Mena disagrees with Bethany, she feels that Bethany is sincere. Debate whether Bethany changes as events unfold at New Advantage High School.
- Describe Teresa and Bethany's behavior toward Mena. Discuss whether Teresa and Bethany might be accused of bullying, harassment, or both. How do they use religion to justify their behavior? Debate whether Teresa and Bethany's behavior would be condoned by most religious institutions.
- At first, Mena hides and withdraws when she is taunted at school. How is this exactly what her taunters want? When does Mena realize that Ms. Shepherd is about to be bullied by Pastor Wells and his young followers? Describe how Ms. Shepherd deals with her bullies.
- Speaking out on controversial subjects or standing up for a person like Denny Pierce can be lonely. How does Mena deal with her feelings of loneliness? At what point does she realize that she has conquered loneliness?
- The young protestors are called "back-turners" because they turn their backs when Ms. Shepherd begins her lecture on evolution. What is a more philosophical meaning of the term "back-turner"?
- Mena says, "Things are awful and ugly right now, but maybe they had to be that way for me to break free." (p. 25) How does the truth eventually set Mena free? Discuss whether her definition of freedom changes as her story unfolds.
- Mena feels that her mother has never understood her. How can a family live in the same house, and not understand one another? Discuss how Mena's relationship with her mother might eventually be repaired.

# for group discussion

- Mena remains religious even after she is thrown out of her church. How does this make her a bigger person than Teresa and Bethany? Discuss how she uses her knowledge of the Bible to help others draw a connection between science and religion.
- Why does Mena feel like a “freak of nature”? How are Casey and Kayla more comfortable as “freaks of nature” than Mena? Discuss how they help her come to terms with her new identification.
- At the beginning of the novel, Mena says that she knows she did the right thing by sticking up for Denny. How does doing the right thing sometimes take more courage than conforming to those who do wrong, or to those who do nothing at all? What does Ms. Shepherd teach Mena about courage?
- “Let Brilliance Find You” is the motto for New Advantage High School. What is the irony in this motto? How does Mena epitomize the motto of the school?
- Ms. Shepherd says, “I teach science. Intelligent design is not science. It is simply the latest name for a religious philosophy known as creationism.” (p. 60–61) How does Ms. Shepherd define evolution? How does her explanation catch the back-turners off guard? Explain how she puts evolution in the context of everyday life.
- How does Pastor Wells’s idea of “theory” differ from the scientific definition of “theory”? Discuss how he influences the protest methods of the 14 “Holy Warriors.”
- Mena says that she has a “crush on science.” (p. 76) Who and what help her gain this new attitude toward science?
- Mena is plagued by guilt throughout the novel. She feels guilty for not helping Denny, and then for lying to her parents about Casey. How is she eventually freed from guilt?
- Mena asks Casey, “Is not saying no to something the same things as saying yes?” (p. 185) How might she answer this question by the end of the novel?
- What is a whistle blower? How does Mena become Kayla’s “perfect whistle blower”?
- Mena makes a list of 10 things that she would like to achieve. Which of the 10 things has she accomplished by the end of the novel? How do Casey and Kayla help her reach her goals? What role does Ms. Shepherd play in Mena’s accomplishments?
- Debate whether Mr. and Mrs. Reece eventually learn to respect their daughter and her noble act in standing up for Denny. Why does it take them so long to see what Pastor Wells is doing to the community?

## vocabulary/ use of language

The vocabulary in this novel isn’t difficult, but readers should be encouraged to make a note of unfamiliar words. Instruct them to try to define the words, taking clues from the context of the story. Such words may include: *paranoid* (p. 7), *vengeance* (p. 26), *distill* (p. 30), *defiance* (p. 63), *mutating* (p. 75), *sorcery* (p. 78), *carnage* (p. 93), *ingrate* (p. 96), *pummel* (p. 96), *besotted* (p. 99), *infiltrating* (p. 99), *populace* (p. 99), *marginalizing* (p. 99), *dissent* (p. 99), *hypocritical* (p. 107), *omnipotent* (p. 119), *unsubstantiated* (p. 121), *perpetuate* (p. 138), *innate* (p. 155), *regurgitated* (p. 155), *absolve* (p. 156), *futile* (p. 158), *vigilance* (p. 166), and *ethereal* (p. 185).

## related titles

by theme

### **The Day They Came to Arrest the Book**

**Nat Hentoff**

Censorship • Values in Conflict • Courage  
Grades 7 up

Laurel-Leaf PB: 978-0-440-91814-1 (0-440-91814-6)

### **The Last Safe Place on Earth**

**Richard Peck**

Censorship • Values in Conflict • Family • Religion  
Grades 7 up

Laurel-Leaf PB: 978-0-440-22007-7 (0-440-22007-6)

### **The Book Thief**

**Markus Zusak**

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Family • Religion  
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## about the author

**Robin Brande** is or has been various combinations of the following: trial attorney, yoga instructor, black belt, entrepreneur, community college professor, Wilderness First Responder, insurance agent, outdoor adventurer, Girl Scout leader, and Sunday school teacher. She is a frequent presenter to girls and young women on topics ranging from public speaking to self-defense. *Evolution, Me & Other Freaks of Nature* is her first novel. She lives in Arizona, with her husband and two beloved dogs.

## internet resources

### **IDEA Center**

[www.ideacenter.org](http://www.ideacenter.org)

The official site for the Intelligent Design & Evolution Awareness Center

### **Evolution vs. Intelligent Design**

[www.theory-of-evolution.net](http://www.theory-of-evolution.net)

Presents theories in the evolution vs. intelligent design debate

### **Court TV Online**

[www.courtTV.com/archive/greatesttrials/scopes](http://www.courtTV.com/archive/greatesttrials/scopes)

An analysis of the famous Scopes Trial

### **Flying Spaghetti Monster**

[www.venganza.org](http://www.venganza.org)

An alternative theory to intelligent design