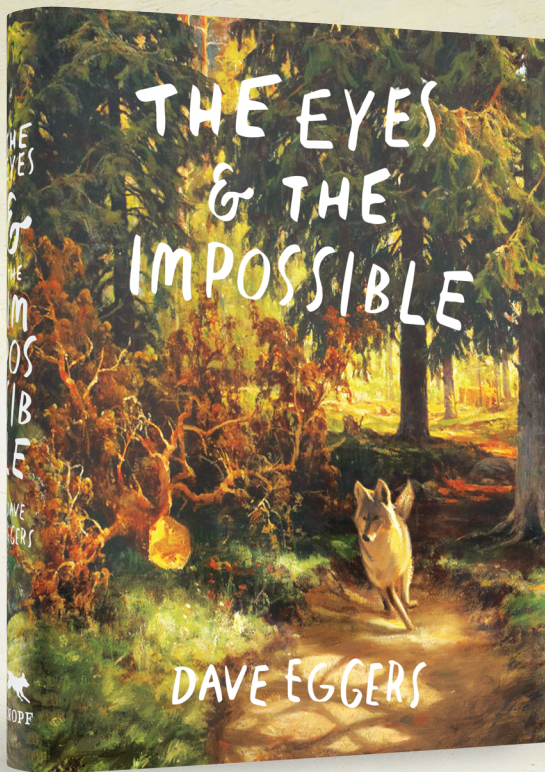
A detailed oil painting of a forest path. The path is made of large, flat stones and leads from the foreground into the distance. On the left, there are dense bushes with autumn-colored leaves in shades of orange, red, and yellow. On the right, there are tall, dark evergreen trees. In the middle ground, a fox with light brown fur and a white chest patch is walking towards the viewer. The lighting is warm, suggesting a late afternoon or early morning sun filtering through the trees, creating dappled light on the path and foliage. The overall mood is serene and mysterious.

# THE EYES & THE IMPOSSIBLE

DAVE EGGERS

**EDUCATORS' GUIDE**

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# The Eyes & the Impossible

Written by Dave Eggers  
Illustrations of Johannes  
by Shawn Harris

**Themes:** freedom, loyalty, friendship, community, belonging, identity, cooperation, problem-solving, commitment to purpose, discovery

## Pre-Reading

1. Look at the cover of this novel. What do you notice? Pay attention to colors, setting, even characters. Now pay attention to the title, *The Eyes & the Impossible*. What do you think this book might be about?
2. When you hear the word *freedom*, what words come to mind? What does it feel like to be free? What are the benefits of freedom? Now consider the opposite. What words are antonyms for freedom? What does it feel like *not* to be free? What are some challenges to freedom?
3. Have you ever read or heard a story told from an animal's point of view? Or maybe you've seen a movie where animals were the main characters and humans either did not exist or played only a minor role. Why might an author include animals as main characters? Why would they use an animal to narrate the story?
4. Divide both sides of a piece of paper into four boxes (giving you eight boxes total). Label each box with one animal: dog, raccoon, bison, seagull, duck, goat, pelican, coyote. Working with a partner, list what you know or think you know about each animal. For example, raccoon: nocturnal, sharp claws. Keep this chart handy. You will add to it as you read the book.
5. In this book you will come across the term "Keeper of the Equilibrium." The word *equilibrium* means balance, stability, steadiness. Do you know anyone who exhibits these qualities? Who is a "Keeper of Equilibrium" in your life, and how do they help keep things steady?
6. Everyone possesses some skills and talents, qualities and virtues that are not only admirable, they also benefit the classroom or school community. What are two or three of your best abilities? How are they valuable to your family? Your class? Your neighborhood or community?

## Discussion Questions

1. As you read, you'll meet the animals listed in your eight-box chart, discover more about them, and learn each animal's name. Add to your list of characteristics, including the characters' names. For example, next to the word raccoon, write the name Angus, and add more specific descriptors along with the page number where you learn the information. For Angus, you might write "chubby, page 29." In addition, confirm any information you already listed by adding the page number where the characteristic is either mentioned or inferred, such as nocturnal (pg. 28).
2. In this novel, you may encounter some unfamiliar vocabulary. The author uses these words to tell a vibrant, richly descriptive story. At the top of a new page in your reader's notebook, write "Wonder Words." As you come across any unfamiliar or interesting words—words you wonder about—jot them down in your notebook, along with the corresponding page number. If the context helps you make a smart guess about the definition, write it next to the word. Use this opportunity to expand your vocabulary and appreciate the author's belief in your ability to discover, enjoy, and learn sophisticated vocabulary.
3. Johannes is extremely fast and he knows it, and sometimes even boasts about his skill. He is also quite masterful when describing this ability. He never says he simply ran. Instead, he treats the reader to visual, sometimes poetic descriptions of his speed ("You have never seen speed like mine. When I run I pull at the earth and make it turn." p. 12). Make a list of the many ways Johannes describes his speed and his skill.
4. In chapter 9, Johannes wonders, "if I could be so easily distracted, mesmerized to the point of becoming vulnerable to being leashed, would they still see me as a reliable envoy?" (p. 63) What is an *envoy*? What are Johannes's concerns at this point in the story? What do these thoughts reveal about his role, responsibility, and identity?
5. Johannes is a dog of many talents. In addition to his speed, his eyesight is exceptional. He is also a skilled planner and problem solver. And he is very perceptive. Pay close attention to Johannes's words of wisdom, which are woven throughout the book. For example, at the beginning of chapter 20, he says, "If there are troubles in your mind, you should think first of the troubles of others; it is the essence of liberation." (p. 127) As you read, record some of his advice in your notebook and cite the page number where it appears.



## Post-Reading

1. Let's revisit the concept of freedom. What does *freedom* mean in this book? How and where does Johannes describe the feeling of being free? Is there any reference to lack of freedom? What words are used to describe this? What are some challenges to freedom in *The Eyes & the Impossible*? How has your understanding of freedom (or lack of freedom) changed or expanded? Discuss these questions in a small group.
2. Reread the very first page of this book. It begins: "This is a work of fiction," and then cautions readers against assuming that "all living things, animals in particular, are simply corollaries to humans." What does this mean? Do you agree or disagree? Is fiction, particularly animal fiction, only make-believe? Are there any places or characters in this novel that remind you of places or people you know? Partner with a classmate for a mini debate. One person will support Dave Eggers's belief; the other person will disagree. Be sure to offer specific examples to support your point of view.
3. This story is told in the first person. As readers, we experience the plot, observe the behavior of the other characters, and learn about the world they are in entirely from Johannes's perspective. First-person narration helps readers gain insight into that character's emotions and inner thoughts. Because of this, we learn a lot about Johannes—not just how he behaves and what happens to him but also what he thinks and feels. Why do you think Dave Eggers decided to tell this story from Johannes's perspective?
4. In reviewing this book, the *Wall Street Journal* referred to Johannes as "appealing hero." What makes him appealing? How is he a hero? Are there other heroes in this book? Be sure to support your response with specifics from the text.
5. This book features some important and serious topics, such as loyalty, the value of friendship, remaining committed to a plan, and the fear of being leashed or caged. But the author also uses a lot of humor. Find some humorous places in this book. What makes them funny? What do you think was the purpose of the humor? Choose one specific incident or scene that was humorous. Read it aloud to a classmate and explain why it was funny and what you think Dave Eggers's purpose was for including humor at that point in the story.
6. In addition to humor, *The Eyes & the Impossible* also includes tension where worrisome events or situations occur. Where is there tension in this story? Choose a specific incident that felt tense. What was happening? How did the characters feel? How did you feel? Why do you think this scene was in the book?
7. In this novel, Dave Eggers uses hyperbole, a type of figurative language that embellishes, exaggerates, and stretches the truth. While not intended as a lie, hyperbole can be dramatic, attention-grabbing, or even humorous. What are some examples of the author using hyperbole in this book? Begin by thinking about places where Johannes exaggerates. Why do you think he does this, and what effect does it have?
8. In addition to character names, the author occasionally capitalizes other nouns, such as Bison (but not seagulls or goats or squirrels). He also capitalized nouns such as Sun, Parks People, Concerteers, and Campers. And he created proper nouns for specific roles: Eyes, Keepers of the Equilibrium. Why do you think he did this?
9. In chapter 35, we read about the final stage of the plan to liberate the Bison. The ship is in view, the birds swarm to distract the humans on the ship, the mass of goats provides a crazy, chaotic escort, hiding the Bison as they trudge to the top of the hill; and early morning colors reveal the glory of the ocean in the near distance. Everything is ready until Freya says, "We can't. . . . We can't go on that ship." An emotional Johannes thinks his plan has failed. What do you think? Was the plan a failure? What do the Bison think?
10. Revisit your list of Johannes's words of wisdom. Select one quote that feels particularly important or inspiring. Share your selected quote either with a partner or in a small group and explain how it is important to the book as well as to your life or the world we are living in.

## Extension Questions & Activities

1. Since Johannes is the narrator of this book, we understand the story mainly from his perspective. What if another character told this story? Choose an incident in this book that might be intriguing to consider from another character's perspective. What scene will you choose, and which character will relay what is happening? Rewrite that scene aiming to capture that character's personality through what they think and say, what they observe, and how they tell the story. Remember, first-person point of view uses the pronouns *I*, *we*, *my*, and *our*.
2. *The Eyes & the Impossible* is an open-ended story. Not all the details are wrapped up. Some readers find open endings satisfying. Other readers are curious to know more. How do you feel about the ending? If the story continued, what do you think might happen next? Write a follow-up chapter that occurs many years later. Tell it from Johannes's or Bertrand's point of view in their new environment or tell it from Sonja's perspective. What adventures will she experience as the Eye?
3. This book includes scenes with a lot of action. Dave Eggers writes with such vivid detail that readers feel like they can see what is happening. Imagine you were hired to turn this book into a movie. As a screen writer, you will need to choose one action-packed scene and design a story board of six to eight frames to show the action. Make some notes in the margins to explain your decisions. *OR* Imagine you were hired to turn this book into a graphic novel. Choose one action-packed scene and re-create it with panels, frames, and speech bubbles.
4. Shawn Harris has created unique illustrations for the cover and interior of this novel. He selected ten classical landscape paintings, mostly from the 1800s, that he could access through open copyright. Then he painted Johannes into each one. Notice how he depicts Johannes running in each illustration.
  - Are there any other scenes or settings in the story that deserve an illustration? Perhaps one that features another animal character? Use the links below from the Smithsonian Museum to view landscape paintings, and choose one that feels appropriate for this story. Make a copy of that painting and draw or paint one of the animal characters into the landscape. Aim to capture the animal's personality and characteristics.
    - [americanart.si.edu/search?query=landscapes](http://americanart.si.edu/search?query=landscapes)
    - [si.edu/spotlight/landscapes-natural-beauty](http://si.edu/spotlight/landscapes-natural-beauty)
  5. There are numerous other illustrated novels told from an animal's point of view. Some of these include:
    - Rosanne Parry's *A Wolf Called Wander* (illustrated by Mónica Armiña)
    - Katherine Applegate's *The One and Only Ivan* and the sequels, *The One and Only Bob* and *The Only and Only Ruby* (illustrated by Patricia Castelao)
    - Sara Pennypacker's *Pax* (illustrated by Jon Klassen)
    - Avi's *Ragweed*, the first book in the *Poppy* series (illustrated by Brian Floca)
    - Tor Seidler's *Firstborn* (illustrated by Chris Sheban)
    - Kathi Appelt's *The Underneath* (illustrated by David Small)Create a book club with some friends; read one of these books and discuss some of the similarities (such as themes of friendship, freedom, and commitment to purpose) as well as the differences (such as setting, characters, and issues that are addressed).

*This guide was written by Nancy J. Johnson, professor emerita in children's/young adult literature at Western Washington University and literacy consultant.*



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