

READING GUIDE



Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award

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Bart Moeyaert. Photo: Stefan Tell.

The Belgian author Bart Moeyaert received the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award in 2019. Moeyaert is a multiple award-winning author who published his first book in 1983 at age 19, and since then has authored some 50 titles in various genres. He has written picture books, novels, works of poetry, plays, song lyrics, television screenplays and essays. Moeyaert is also a translator of children's and YA literature to Dutch, has served as Poet Laureate of the City of Antwerp (2006–2007) and has a reputation as an accomplished speaker.

Interested readers can learn more about Moeyaert on his website, which includes an international section with texts in English. Information is also available at alma.se and a number of Moeyaert's interviews and lectures can be streamed on YouTube.

www.bartmoeyaert.com

www.alma.se

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About the book

When Moeyaert was awarded the ALMA, the jury wrote, “He portrays relationships at crisis point with a cinematic immediacy, even as his complex narratives suggest new ways forward.” This description applies perfectly to *It's Love We Don't Understand*. The book is written in three parts that together make up a story about love, betrayal, endurance and the survival instinct in a family where roles chafe and the children have to take on adult responsibilities.

Each part of the book describes a short segment of time: a quarter of an hour, an afternoon, an evening. But each episode functions almost like a magnifying glass, so powerfully focused on one spot that larger questions blaze up: questions about our interdependence as human beings and how we deal with fragility and vulnerability. This succeeds, in part, because of the skillful composition of the situations, but also because of Moeyaert's poetic and often surprising turns of phrase that deftly capture a mood or flip perspectives.

It's Love We Don't Understand is narrated by the family's second-youngest child. We never hear her name; she is just called “Sis.” She says she is too young to take care of herself, but she shoulders a great deal of responsibility for her little sister, Edie, who is “too young for everything but wants to try anything at all.” Edie is an unusual child who rarely speaks and who prefer places and activities slightly removed from the other family members. The sibling group also includes a big brother, Axel, who is the narrator's main ally, and Bonnie, the oldest sister, who has already moved out but comes home to help out when the children's mother fails in her role or becomes overwhelmed. This is something that happens repeatedly. The children's father has receded more and more into the distance, and the children now live with their mother and her boyfriend. In the second part of the book, an old man joins the family constellation: Skip the Boatman, with whom they are more or less saddled against their will, but who ultimately becomes one of them.

The question of when and where the various parts of the book take place remains indeterminate. In the first vignette, it is summer, hot and stifling. The family is going to visit Bonnie, driving their sweltering car through farmlands where yellow wheat fields seem to stretch off into infinity. The “where” is vivid—the wheat fields, a scrubby bush, a highway too far away to hear—but it floats in space and time. The same is true of the family home that is the setting for vignettes two and three. It has a kitchen, a hall, a sewing room and a yard; there are streets and drenching rain and fallen leaves; there is a train station with a waiting area. And there is another city, where Axel lives in the third vignette. In that vignette, the evenings are warm enough to sit outside (maybe with a blanket), and in the mornings the bees buzz over fields of flowers. There are whens and wheres, then, but there is no clear orientation in time or space. As readers, we are forced (or invited) to take in the specific places and times and situations that are presented to us, and make of them what we can. Situations that blaze with fragility and strength, vulnerability and hope.

Summary of the three parts

THE END OF BORDZEK, TOLD BY MYSELF WHO WAS THERE

The first part of the book takes place on an oppressively hot summer's day, inside and outside a car. The family—the narrator, Edie, Axel, their mother, the mother's boyfriend Bordzek and Bordzek's dog—are going to visit Bonnie. The mood inside the car is as oppressive as the heat outside, and suddenly the suppressed emotion explodes. Why is Axel so angry? What is it that their mother doesn't want to hear? The narrator sees, understands and tries to take care of Edie while Axel and her mother argue loudly. Her reflections connect the argument to night sounds at home: Bordzek's nightly visits to Axel's room and their mother's inability and unwillingness to see what is being done to her child. After a screeching of brakes, a slamming of car doors, a physical altercation and spurting blood, the car journey nevertheless continues. Everyone is still in the car. Bordzek's end comes later, after a comment by Edie that nearly sends her mother driving off the road.

Boatman's Arrival

The second vignette portrays the somewhat absurd turn of events that occur when the family's grandmother dies and they "inherit" her male companion, Skip the Boatman. The will states that Boatman is to go live with the family, although the mother does not really want him. As usual, it is the children, primarily the narrator and Axel, who have to manage the situation. A guest room is got ready, a welcome dinner planned, and the narrator and her mother walk to the train station in the pouring rain to greet Boatman, whom they have never met. The narrator fantasizes that he is a wealthy man, kind and steady; although she realizes that the dream is just a dream, she is still disappointed when she sees the real Boatman, an infirm old man in a wheelchair. Still, he has unexpected, even delightful qualities: for example, the way his thoughts sometimes seem to mirror the narrator's. And when he finally comes into the warm kitchen where Edie, Axel and Bonnie are waiting, he and Edie hit it off immediately.

What Are They Doing Over There in Charlestown?

In the third vignette, Axel has moved to another city with "his Mortimer." The move was preceded by a physical scuffle between Axel and his mother's new boyfriend, and now the children are not allowed even to say Axel's name. But Axel is constantly in the narrator's thoughts. She imagines his new life with his boyfriend and tells herself he surely misses his little sister in spite of it all. She sits in the kitchen with Bonnie, who is helping take care of her, Edie, Boatman and Boatman's dog, since their mother has gone off with her boyfriend. Boatman sits in the yard, mumbling to himself. Edie should be sleeping but has climbed down the downspout, and the narrator is trying to write a letter to Axel. But maybe, in the end, there's no harm done?

For book groups

Some books seem tailor-made for book groups, and *It's Love We Don't Understand* is one of them. The overarching question, “What is this story saying to me?” and its follow-up, “What is my response?” can be answered in a multitude of ways, thanks to the multifaceted narrative and the complex character relationships. A conversation about these questions would be both rich and interesting. And, of course, many of the questions suggested below for classroom use could also be used in a book group for adults.

In the classroom

It's Love We Don't Understand is a perfect classroom text! With a fairly narrow scope, relatively easy language, and complex subject matter, it is both feasible and suitable for a wide range of student groups. *It's Love We Don't Understand* requires attentive reading. It offers an excellent opportunity for students to practice that skill and develop as readers. At the same time, teachers should consider their students' comfort level with texts that are not clearly anchored in a temporal or physical setting, that omit some of the background story and context, and where much of the content and action lie under the surface, instead of being explicitly narrated.

Before reading

Before students begin to read, teachers should consider how much introduction to Moeyaert's narrative technique they need to give. Certainly, some groups may be able to jump right in without further ado (including many older high school groups, although not all). Other groups may benefit from an orientation. Teachers might point out the way the book drops readers right into the middle of the action, that much of the story takes place under the surface, and that the kind of clear narrative exposition found in many other books is missing here.

SHORT WRITING ASSIGNMENT ON THE BOOK TITLE

One way to introduce the text is to reflect on the title of the book (which reappears in the second vignette). Give students a short writing assignment: what kind of love might it be that we “don't understand”? Is there a kind of love that we “do understand”? Who might the “we” in the title be?

The written responses can be the basis for a group discussion either before reading (to broaden the individual reading experience) or after (to examine how answers to the initial questions may have changed and deepened after reading).

During reading

Depending upon the reading level of the group and the broader context in which the book is being read, teachers might want to give students questions or guidelines to direct their reading. A number of the questions suggested here for after reading would work during reading as well.

READ AND RESPOND LOGS

For advanced readers, it may be enough to have them collect quotations as they read that they find particularly thought-provoking or evocative. One good method is to have students keep a read-and-respond log where they copy down quotes and write their own short responses.

ASSIGNING FOCUS CHARACTERS

Another way to work on “read and respond” skills is to use “focus characters.” Each student is assigned a character to focus on while reading. They collect quotes and thoughts about their character. What do we learn about the character in terms of appearance, previous experiences, most important relationships, mood, actions, dialogue? The quotes can form the basis discussions with other students after reading.

Because Bonnie, the oldest sister, is mentioned just a few times in the first part of the book, she is not a suitable focus character for a discussion of that part alone. She will still figure in the discussion, however, because she is an important person for both the narrator and Axel. Students who are focusing on Bordzek might well also focus on his dog; the same applies to Boatman and his dog in the second and third parts. The dogs can be seen as mirrors or extensions of their owners, which itself might lead to some interesting observations and discussions.

One approach is to have students work with their focus characters in three stages. In stage one, each student collects quotes and thoughts about their character. In stage two, students with the same focus character discuss the book and their observations in a group. They should try to collectively assemble as much material as possible about the character. This offers students new perspectives on the book and allows them to develop a broader understanding of their focus characters. In stage three, students discuss in one large group, or in a few groups in which all the focus characters are represented. Together they should examine how each different character affects the story and the other characters, and how each character reflects the main questions and themes raised in the text.

After reading

For less advanced readers, it is probably a good idea to have book discussions at several points along the way. Having the opportunity to explain things that are not clear, so the entire group can go forward with more or less the same understanding of the text, is very valuable. Each part of the book also contains much to discuss in and of itself, in regards to both content and form. When students have made it through the whole book, there will be further perspectives to explore, for example ideas about evolution and change.

Below are some sample questions you might want to use in discussions. Some apply specifically to one part of the book and others to the book as a whole. The page numbers are from the Front Street edition of 2001, translated by Wanda Boeke.

THE END OF BORDZEK, TOLD BY MYSELF WHO WAS THERE

- Early on in the story (p. 7), the narrator describes the family car trip by saying, “Everything is panting in here.” In what ways is the panting described? What feelings do these descriptions evoke in you as a reader?
- Edie is described as an unusual child and the narrator takes a lot of responsibility for her. What impression do you get of Edie? What role does she play in the events that unfold?
- There are many descriptions of how different bodies look, feel and smell. How do these descriptions shape your perception of the characters and their relationships to one another?
- There is a clear contrast between the sweltering car on the road and Bonnie’s kitchen, the family’s destination: hot, colorful and tense vs. cool, quiet, and relaxed. In what ways do these different environments help reinforce the content of the story?
- A word that the narrator uses more than once in her descriptions of people and situations is “control.” Most of the characters in the story lose “control” in one way or another. What are the ways in which they lose control, and what do they reveal about the different characters?
- “You know a lot, Sis,” Axel says to the narrator after she too finally loses control in the tense situation in the car (p. 40). How has the narrator earlier revealed that she knows what the conflict between Alex and her mother is really about? What kind of a picture do you get of her, based on what she relates?
- When the car finally starts moving again, the children’s mother is at the wheel and Alex sits beside the narrator. “He is waiting for me to hold his hand. I will hold his hand, but first I still have to get used to a few thoughts. I smile with lips curled out” (p. 45). What new thoughts do you think she has to get used to?
- How do you interpret the very last sentence of part one: “After that, she almost misses the curve” (p. 47)?

BOATMAN'S ARRIVAL

- At the beginning of this vignette, we hear about a “we” who do things together: reading, thinking, believing. Who is included in “we”? How is this “we” different from the others?
- Axel and the narrator have to tidy the sewing room to make space for their new guest. It takes the whole morning because they find boxes to inspect, whose contents they ponder. At this point, there is a reference to the book’s title: “love, which we don’t understand” (p. 54). What connections do you see between the things Alex and the narrator find in the boxes, and “love we don’t understand”?
- In the sewing room, when Axel and the narrator talk about love, Axel also says that “love is rude and indecent and bursts into the coldest houses” (p. 66). The narrator reflects on this when she and her mother are imagining what Skip the Boatman might be like. How do you think Axel’s claim reflects his experiences of love, or those of the narrator or their mother?
- While the family is preparing for Boatman’s arrival, their mother talks about “how it used to be” (p. 55). How does what she says about her upbringing and her family help explain her present behavior?
- “I’m suddenly almost happy,” says the narrator when they have almost finished getting the house ready for Boatman (p. 58). What is it that makes her happy, and how does the author portray this emotion? What does it make you feel as a reader?
- During the walk to and from the train station, we get many descriptions of the mother’s behavior. How does she treat her daughter? Where do the two of them find common ground? When do they come into conflict? How does the narrator handle her mother?
- The text frequently takes up beauty and prettiness. Axel says that “men are dangerous anyway, handsome or not” (p. 59). The narrator draws a pretty picture to welcome Skip the Boatman, which is transformed (destroyed?) by the rain. The children’s mother wants to look pretty when she meets Boatman, despite her wet hair and raincoat, and smiles at the stationmaster to get him to do what she wants. The narrator herself says, “I know that I’m not pretty but that I get pretty from what’s around me” (p. 68). What perspectives do you think the text offers on beauty? And what do you make of the narrator’s view of herself and beauty?
- How would you describe the way the various family members meet Boatman?
- During the preparations for Boatman’s arrival, Axel breaks a glass. “We still had to break a glass,” he says (p. 60). Broken glass appears again in the last sentence of this part of the book. Is there a connection between these two parts of the text, and if so, what do you think it is?

WHAT ARE THEY DOING OVER THERE IN CHARLESTOWN?

- The narrator misses Axel, who has moved in with his boyfriend and doesn’t live with the family any more. How would you describe her feelings about Alex’s new life?

- When Boatman asks, “Where is your brother?” (p. 117), something happens. How does the mood change, and what is responsible for the shift?
- Boatman talks all the time, but only two things he says are true: that he once built a lighthouse, and that he has a dog. What significance do the lighthouse and the dog take on during the events of the evening in the garden?
- In the final sentence of the book, Axel sleeps deeply beside his Mortimer. Compare this final sentence with the concluding sentences of the first two vignettes. Are there similarities? Differences? What is the very last sentence saying?

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BOOK AS A WHOLE

- When you think about the characters in the book, how do you view them at the end, compared to the beginning? Who has changed, and how? What caused the changes?
- The author, Bart Moeyaert has spoken in many interviews about being influenced by Astrid Lindgren and about feeling an intimacy with the characters on her fictive Seacrow Island. The Seacrow Island dog is named Bosun, which is very similar to Boatman (the dog’s Swedish name, *Båtsman*, is even more similar). Do you see any similarities between Bosun’s role in the Seacrow Island stories and Boatman’s role in *It's Love We Don't Understand*?
- The family in *It's Love We Don't Understand* faces has suffered many difficulties and many wounds. But near the end of the book, Bonnie asks, “Can it do any harm?” (p 126). Having read the book, what do you think?
- If you had to sum this story up in three words, which words would you pick? Why?
- Did you notice anything special or unusual about the author’s way of telling the story or his use of language? If so, what was it, and what effect or effects do you think it had?
- What do you think this book is trying to say to its readers? And how do you react to its message?

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THE ASTRID LINDGREN MEMORIAL AWARD (ALMA) is the world's largest award for children's and young adult literature. The award amounts to SEK 5 million and is given annually to a single laureate or to several. Authors, illustrators, oral storytellers and reading promoters are eligible for the award, which is designed to promote interest in children's and young adult literature. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is the foundation of our work. An expert jury selects the laureate(s) from candidates nominated by institutions and organisations all over the world. The Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award was founded by the Swedish government in 2002 and is administrated by the Swedish Arts Council.

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