

A Reader's Guide for

Shortcuts

by Amy Bearce

About the book:

As a psychic empath, 14-year-old Parker Mills can sense strong emotions in others. And the new girl, Mia? She's so sad it's like a gut punch. Luckily, Parker's developed a toolkit of mentoring and match-making to keep everyone around her as happy as possible, preferring parties to pain any day. But Mia isn't interested in any of Parker's tips and tricks. This is more than just annoying (which it totally is.)

Parker is one of four secret psychics in at her middle school, and her precog bestie has a vision that Mia's pain will lead to the psychics' discovery by some very dangerous people looking for human lab rats. It'll all go down at the middle school Halloween dance if they can't help Mia first. But when Parker's gift goes haywire, keeping everyone safe suddenly gets a whole lot harder, and with the dance looming, she's running out of time to stop the coming disaster.

With dangerous secrets, sweet crushes, and psychic powers, *Shortcuts* is a page-turner with humor and heart, perfect for ages 10-14 and up.

Shortcuts first released in 2019, with CBAY Books and re-released in 2021 with Snowy Wings Publishing.

Two Options:

- *Book Discussion Questions*--These are big, broad questions that work best after the complete book has been read. Can be adapted for book clubs, reading journals, reading workshop class, library groups or more.
- *Chapter Comprehension Questions*—For those reading the book chapter by chapter with a class. Later questions will include spoilers, as some questions will mention previous scenes.

Also included: vocabulary possibilities, essay suggestions, project ideas



Book Discussion Questions

1. Describe Parker at the beginning of the novel. Does she remind you of anyone? Would you want to be her friend? Why or why not?
2. How does Parker's relationship with the other three psychics affect the story? What would happen in this story if they weren't as close as they are?
3. Compare/contrast Parker and Mia. How does their relationship change throughout the course of the book?
4. What does Ethan contribute to the story? What would the book be like without him?
5. How does the language of the text evoke both humor and darkness?
6. Provide an objective summary of the story in your own words, no longer than two paragraphs.
7. What is a theme of this novel and what in the story supports this theme?
8. In this story, psychic empathy takes a leading role, with impossible abilities to manipulate moods. But how does this book emphasize the importance of every day emotions and authentic friendships?
9. Can you think of other books (to include comics or graphic novels) involving psychic powers? How is this story the same and different?
10. How would this book be different if it were written in third person point of view?
11. Think of an alternative title for the book. What made you choose that?



GRADE 6 (used as example—can be adapted to fit other grades’ standards) Common Core Standards – Reading Standards for Literature	Book Discussion Questions 1-11
Key Ideas and Details	
RL.6.1 Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.	1, 11
RL.6.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.	6, 7
RL.6.3 Describe how a particular story’s or drama’s plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.	2, 3
Craft and Structure	
RL.6.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.	5
RL.6.5 Analyze how a particular sentence, chapter, scene, or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot.	4, 7
RL.6.6 Explain how an author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text.	10
Integration of Knowledge and Ideas	
RL.6.7 Compare and contrast the experience of reading a story, drama, or poem to listening to or viewing an audio, video, or live version of the text, including contrasting what they “see” and “hear” when reading the text to what they perceive when they listen or watch	Audio and video of Shortcuts is not currently available.
RL6.8 Not applicable to literature.	n/a
RL.6.9 Compare and contrast texts in different forms or genres (e.g., stories and poems; historical novels and fantasy stories) in terms of their approaches to similar themes and topics.	9
Range and Level of Text Complexity	
RL.6.10 By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 6–8 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.	Applicable through reading this novel. Estimated Lexile score is 850L.
*Question 8 is an application question not covered by CC, but I believe still valuable.	



Chapter Comprehension Questions

*Individual questions are not broken into Common Core standards, due to space limitations.

Chapter One:

1. Describe Parker. What shows she has high self-esteem?
2. What does it mean that Parker is “a walking X-Ray machine for the heart”?
3. What word best describes Parker’s relationship with Avery? Explain why you chose that word.
4. What does the event with Kayla show us about Parker?
5. What do we know about the setting and this world so far?

Chapter 2:

1. How is Avery different and yet similar to Parker?
2. Describe Ethan and Deshawn.
3. What is Parker’s home life like?
4. What lines from the text hint that Parker has romantic feelings toward Ethan?
5. What is important about Parker’s meeting with Mia?

Chapter 3:

1. Why does Ethan have to wave Avery’s hand for her using his powers?
2. What word would you use to describe Mia? Use the text to support your answer.
3. How has Parker influenced Elizabeth Frenneli’s life?
4. What do you think will happen with Parker and Mia? What makes you think that?
5. What is the main problem of the story so far?



Chapter 4:

1. Why is Parker's performance included at this point in the story?
2. Has there ever been a time when you've been on stage? Describe how you think Parker might be feeling as she performs.
3. What does this text mean? "The first thing I did was check the blue table by the door, where my mother stored her little purse. The table was empty. Good."
4. Why does Parker's father tell her not to interfere in people's sadness?
5. Describe Parker and her mother's relationship, based on the end of this chapter.

Chapter 5

1. What do we learn about one potential future in this chapter?
2. What's Avery's plan in response to her vision?
3. Why is it important to keep Mia happy?
4. What does this sentence mean: "My head felt full of helium."
5. What does Parker decide to do in response to Avery's vision?

Chapter 6:

1. Where does Parker take Mia and why?
2. What is the significance of Parker getting a painful shock from Mia after looking at the sketch book?
3. The text says: "Empaths didn't see things like that. Or who knows, maybe they did if the feeling was strong enough." How was this psychic experience different?
4. What does Parker realize about spending time with Mia?
5. What happens when Parker shows up at Avery's?



Chapter 7 and 8:

1. How does the setting influence the story?
2. Describe Mia's response to Josh.
3. At the end of chapter 7, Parker and Avery come up with a new plan to get Mia and Josh together. What is it?
4. Describe Dr. O'Malley and her relationship with Parker.
5. What shocks Parker in chapter 8?

Chapter 9:

1. What can you conclude about Parker when she names her plan to help Mia, "Operation Cupid"?
2. What do readers learn about Mia from the line, "She scrunched her shoulders in a shrug and ran her hand along the black portfolio with the unthinking motion of a pet lover petting their favorite cat"?
3. Look at this line from the text: "Oh, that's just a guy back home." Mia's words tripped over each other. What does this wording suggest about her feelings in this moment?
4. What does Deshawn mean when he tells Parker, "Just sayin', maybe worry about your own backyard before you keep mowing everyone else's."
5. Why do the Fab Four have a meeting?

Chapter 10:

1. What is Mia so afraid of?



2. The team learns a lot about Mia from Deshawn listening in with his gift. What do we learn about Deshawn from his reaction to his role in discovering the information?
3. What does Parker feel from her mother?
4. Describe Avery's newest vision.
5. Why does Parker feel certain that helping Mia find love is the path to success?

Chapter 11 & 12:

1. How does Mia respond to having Josh in class?
2. What happens when Parker meets Dr. O'Malley in the hallway? What do you think the counselor means by her strange words?
3. What major event happens between Parker and her mother?
4. What does Parker's father mean when he warns Parker, "You can't turn a caterpillar into a butterfly overnight. It's not natural."
5. Why does Parker ask for Ethan's help?

Chapter 13:

1. Compare and contrast Ethan's family with Parker's.
2. What is Parker's goal in her practice session with Ethan?
3. How does Parker make him feel when she focuses?
4. How do you think Ethan feels when Parker says she'll ask someone else to the dance? What from the text makes you think that?
5. What prevents Parker from knowing how Ethan feels about her with any certainty?



Chapter 14:

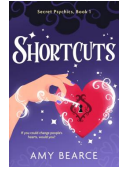
1. What is the most likely reason Parker doesn't tell the rest of the Fab Four that she's manipulating the emotions of other students?
2. Parker changes the mood of both Darla and Kayla. What is her motivation for doing so?
3. Why do you think Parker asks Ethan if he's ever tried to push his gift to its limits?
4. Summarize the story up to this point, in no more than two paragraphs.
5. Do you think Darla and Kayla would appreciate the help with their moods, if they knew? Why or why not?

Chapter 15:

1. What happens when Deshawn tells the others in their group that Parker's been practicing her gift?
2. What effect does Parker have on Mia in this chapter?
3. How does Parker's gift seem to change in this chapter?
4. Why does Parker believe Mia is lying about something?
5. Parker uses her gift to cement her friendship with Mia without thinking. What does that suggest about her character?

Chapter 16:

1. What does Parker mean when she changes the name of her plan from Operation Cupid to Operation Love Doctor?
2. How does Josh show respect and kindness in this scene?
3. What is Parker's opinion about the state of Mia and Josh's relationship?
4. What shows Parker really cares for Avery?
5. Describe Parker's feelings about her gift at the end of the chapter.



Chapter 17:

1. Describe the effects of Parker's gift on people with and without mental blocks.
2. Why does Parker influence Todd?
3. Parker doesn't tell anyone about her choice to influence her mother again. What does that suggest?
4. What do we learn about Parker's gift based on her conversation with Darla?
5. After Parker uses her gift to influence Mia to agree to a sleepover, why does Ethan say, "Remind me never to get on your bad side"?

Chapter 18:

1. Explain why Parker thinks the sleepover could be key.
2. What is the significance of the movie they choose to watch?
3. How does Mia respond to the prodding questions of the other girls?
4. What happens when the candles blow out?
5. Parker thinks her gift has changed from a cute kitten to a roaring lion. What is she saying about her gift?

Chapter 19:

1. How does the description of Parker's entrance into the school Monday morning affect the mood of the story?
2. What word best describes Parker's attitude in these sentences: "I felt like there should be a personal soundtrack playing everywhere I went. I couldn't wait to do my Electra monologue for the talent show tryouts after school on Friday. Right now, the way I felt, I'd be at the top of my game for any show."
3. How does the unexpected downturn in Darla's happiness relate to the theme of the story?
4. What evidence is shown that Mia really has grown to care for Parker?



5. What is Parker's new suspicion about Mia? What evidence makes her believe this could be true?

Chapter 20:

1. How does Parker's realization about Mia change the plot?
2. How does Parker feel about Avery's change of costumes? What text supports your opinion?
3. Why does Avery not believe Parker's new theory?
4. How does Dr. O'Malley seem threatening in this chapter?
5. What do we learn about Parker from her response to Dr. O'Malley?

Chapter 21:

1. Why does Parker feel bad for Kayla?
2. How does Electra's life parallel Parker's in some ways?
3. What does Parker do by accident at her try-outs?
4. Parker turns to Ethan for support in this chapter. In what ways does he help and in what ways is he not so helpful?
5. What is implied when Parker squares her shoulders at the end of the chapter?

Chapter 22:

1. This chapter describes a change to Avery's vision. What's different now?
2. Why is Avery hurt?
3. When a fight breaks out among the dancers, what might readers conclude from what happens?
4. What does Parker's father want her to understand?



5. What is the symbolism of Parker's choice of Halloween costume?

Chapter 23 and 24:

1. Describe Parker's feelings toward Ethan in this chapter and what she decides to do.
2. What does this paragraph mean?

At first, it seemed all was perfect... almost. The happy couple danced, but they didn't kiss. They smiled shyly but didn't laugh. I looked at Avery with a question mark in my eyes, but Avery shook her head and shrugged her shoulders.

3. What is the significance of Ethan using his gift during his performance?
4. How has Mia and Josh's relationship progressed and what has Parker's role been?
5. Summarize how everything goes wrong for Parker in chapter 24.

Chapter 25:

1. How does Parker's time with Ethan in the library affect the story?
2. What unexpected event occurs?
3. Parker learns that her gift isn't what she thinks. What does she realize?
4. What is Mia's gift? What events from the past support this realization?
5. According to Josh, why has Ethan been acting more indiscreet with his gift?

Chapter 26:

1. What words are used to describe the setting? How does the weather impact the story's mood?
2. Parker says she understands why Mia keeps her gift under lock and key. What does she mean?
3. How does Mia react to Parker's confession?



4. What response shows readers that Mia really cares for Josh?
5. Parkers states that finding the truth deep within her and Mia wouldn't hurt Mia, only her, Parker. Explain why this is true.

Chapter 27:

1. What things do Mia and Parker have in common?
2. How has Parker changed, as evidenced by her response to Mia during her breakdown?
3. What occurrence reveals that Mia's been keeping a big tragedy secret?
4. What does Parker admit to herself about her effect on Mia?
5. Summarize what happens with Josh.

Chapter 28:

1. Describe Mia's view of herself.
2. How does this quote highlight one of the central themes of the story: "Love like this was real, and my projected feelings, even when super-sized, offered only a poor substitute."
3. Why does Parker tell about her mother to Mia?
4. Describe the way the weather mirrors the emotional state of Mia.
5. What is the significance of this dialogue between Josh and Mia:

"I hear those sparkling lights are just bits of dust burning up," Josh told Mia with a smile.

"Someone once told me we're all made of stardust, and everything's beautiful in the right time and place. This is my time and place."

Chapter 29:

1. What is Parker's realization about her parents' relationship?



2. What is Parker's intention with regards to her gift for the future?
3. How do readers know that Josh truly cares for Mia, and vice versa?
4. How does the scene in the hallway with Parker build the plot? What part of the plot is this? Climax? Rising action? Falling action? Inciting event?
5. What is a main theme of the book? Support your answer with text from the story.

Suggested Vocabulary

RL.6.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.

paranormal—chapter 2

stilted—chapter 3

infamous—chapter 5

trite—chapter 9

intervention—chapter 15

nostalgia—chapter 17

angst—chapter 20

visible—chapter 23

inhibitions—chapter 28

pandemonium—chapter 29



Vocabulary activities: Pick 1 or 2

1. Find each vocabulary word above in the sentence in the listed chapter. Write your own definition based on the context of the word. Then look up the word and see how close you came to figuring out the correct definition.
2. Use these ten words in sentences of your own.
3. Find two more words you were uncertain of in the story, from any point in the book. Write what you think they mean. Then look them up and confirm.

Essays and activities:

1. Imagine you are making a movie of *SHORTCUTS*. Who would you cast for each of the characters and why? What would be the hardest part of making the movie?
2. If you were to give one of the characters another psychic gift, what gift would you give and why?
3. Write a character sketch of one character in the book. Bonus for drawing an image.
4. If you had to pick one character to go on a long adventure with, who would you pick and why? Make a class graph to see which character wins the “Best Journey Companion” award.
5. You are a reporter of a newspaper and you are there during the last scene of the book. Write your article about what happens.
6. As a craft, make a Halloween costume (see Pinterest for many ideas) and then compare the class choices to the costumes described at the dance.
7. Consider Parker, Mia, Ethan, and Josh. Decide who changed the most in this story and use the text to defend your opinion.
8. Do a research project on the history of psychic abilities in science fiction. What are other books that use psychic abilities as a central portion of their storyline?



9. Using a Web 2.0 tool such as Bubbl.us, Popplet, Padlet, or Spiderscribe, make a plot diagram, showing the main plot points in the story. Be sure to include the inciting incident, rising action, climax and falling action.

10. Make a book trailer for the book and publish it online. Then please make sure you share your link with Amy Bearce on her Facebook page or author website, so she can show off your talented work!

Websites:

www.amybearce.com

www.snowywingspublishing.com