

**Teen Book Club Discussion: *Acephalous* (series book 1)****Young Adult and Teen fiction, ages 15+**

**Disclaimer: The novel and accompanying discussion involve topics such as, but not limited to, addiction, mental health, healthy and unhealthy relationships, LGBTQ relationships/coming out, death/loss**

The following are discussion topics you can use in your reading group to generate a collaborative exchange of ideas and opinions about the book's theme(s), plot, and characters. There are many possible responses in an open discussion, and book club talks tend to shy away from making the distinction of right answers and wrong answers. Allow the talk to flow naturally, posing new questions when they organically transition within the ongoing discussion. It's fine to skip questions or go in a different order. Also, feel free to adjust the literary terminology and topics to suit your reading group's age and ability.

Open the discussion by mentioning the title and main characters of the book. Often, someone will speak up with an opinion or observation about one of the characters that can jumpstart the discussion.

**CHARACTERS:**

- Breena, protagonist/anti-hero/round character
- Atlas, antagonist/static character
- Lilly, minor character
- Jordan, minor character
- Tabitha, villain
- Linda, minor character/villain's foil
- Ari, minor character

**DISCUSSION:**

- **General character summaries/discussion:** personalities (shy, outgoing, cautious, etc.), behaviors, mannerisms, and interests (lying, confrontation, escapism, laughing, sarcasm, joking, nervous habits, hobbies, etc.), similarities and differences between characters and between characters and readers
- **What are some of the themes of the book?**
  - Identity, growth, courage, honesty, confronting addictions/struggles/fears
- **How do the characters embody/interact with these themes?**
- **What problems do the characters face, major and minor?**
- **What does Breena want more than anything? Does she get what she wants? If yes, how? Is this a good thing?**

- **Breana often contradicts herself by her actions and words. What do we learn about her through these opposing choices?**
- **Atlas and Breana both have difficult pasts. Do they cope in similar ways? Healthy ways?**
- **Atlas believes he and Breana are the same. Are they? How are they different?**
- **Would Breana have been better off never meeting Atlas?**
- **Do you think that Breana would have found out about her true identity/lineage/destiny at some point in her life regardless of Atlas' intervention?**
- **Breana waffled between chasing Atlas and being chased by Atlas. As outsiders, it's easy to see that neither were good situations. Why do you think Breana risked herself, allowed such things to continue, etc. rather than telling someone, kicking him to the curb when he became cruel and possessive, etc.? Despite her concern, she was a little thrilled that Atlas was following her. What does this say about her mindset and unhealthy relationships?**
- **Lilly and Jordan have been Breana's best friends since early childhood. Should they have noticed Breana's addiction problem earlier on?**
- **As Breana's best friends, is her wellbeing partially their responsibility? Should they have confronted Breana or gone to her mom, Lexa, about her mental health?**
- **Lilly and Jordan stuck around through all of Breana's personal and health drama, even when she was selfish or unkind to them. Was this the right choice? Would you stick around if a friend treated you like that? There are valid answers on both sides, so explain.**
- **Discuss Breana and Jordan's relationship. How does it develop? Should Jordan have kept pressing Breana when she was clear that she wasn't interested? Is this persistent or rude? What are your opinions of Jordan showing up in London?**
- **After London, was Breana using Jordan or was their relationship a natural progression of their long friendship? If he was being used, did Jordan know it? If yes, should he have allowed it?**
- **Which is worse: Jordan knowing he was being used and allowing it, or not knowing he was being used and thinking all was genuine?**
- **Were Breana's feelings for Jordan genuine regardless of her intentions, or do her intentions invalidate the emotions?**
- **Lilly confessed to Breana that she loves her. Breana's reaction wasn't purposefully mean, but it wasn't warm, either. She was focused on how everything impacted her rather than how big that moment was for Lilly. Without being able to reciprocate Lilly's feelings, how could Breana have handled this more compassionately?**
- **Discuss the lore and magic of the dream-world and illusions Breana discovers.**
- **How do the dreams differ from the illusions?**

- **Based on what Atlas and Tabitha reveal to Breena throughout the novel, what options does Breena have for moving forward, including those she might not have considered in the book?**
- **What is your reaction to Breena's final choice to solve the main threat by killing Tabitha? Do you think this is really a solution?**
- **How do you think these events will play out in book 2 of the series?**
- **Where are all the parents throughout the drama that unfolds? How do the varying parenting styles impact the way Jordan, Breena, and Atlas act? Are the characters' behaviors solely a result of the way they're parented? Could/Should the parents have stepped in? Why is it important that the parents *didn't* step in? What is the value in having the characters bail themselves out of their own messes?**
- **How do you think the book would have gone if Breena had told her mother right away that she thought she had a stalker? Backtrack a bit more, and how might it all unfold if she went to Lexa about her mental health months or years earlier, when the nightmares first started?**
- **What was your favorite moment or scene? Why?**
- **What was your least favorite moment or scene? Why?**
- **Do you identify with or feel similar to any of the characters? Share how if you'd like.**

### **Formal Literary Discussion**

- **What is the exposition/beginning of the story?**
  - Internal Conflict: Breena wishes she was somebody else. She wants a way to escape her reality or change her life.
  - External Conflict: Breena embarks on a solo trip in London, where she discovers her dreams might be more than random images, and the man she sees in those dreams is stalking her.
- **What is the rising action?**
  - One of Breena's imaginations materializes in the living room of her London flat. She doesn't understand what's happening and tries to brush it off. The uneasy feeling of being watched and followed persists and, despite Jordan's (unwelcome) intervention, Breena is drawn in by Atlas and his teachings. After a summer of learning from him, she is heartbroken by his abandonment of her and undergoes multiple coma-like sleeps to search for him through her dreams. When she finds him, she is manipulated into assisting Atlas in bringing Tabitha's evil intentions to fruition. Learning that she is Tabitha's daughter helps to galvanize Breena into finally using her born talents to stop Tabitha (and Atlas), but only after struggling to choose reality over the option of escape. In a risky plan, she sets up an opportunity to sabotage Tabitha. The plan backfires, and a

flaw in her illusion causes her to get stuck in that astral moment for months. She has to escape.

- **What was the climax of the story?**
  - Breena must destroy her astral body in order to return to her physical one, losing her astral connection.
- **What was the falling action?**
  - Breena still hasn't recovered from losing her connection, and she continues to train Jordan to take her place in protecting them from the riots that break out (because she failed to stop Tabitha in time). Bree learns how to defeat Tabitha in the physical world using her innate fire and the skills Jordan has acquired.
- **What is the resolution?**
  - Breena kills Tabitha and tries to start putting her friends first. She decides to take responsibility by calling Vos for guidance on moving forward and repairing her connection.

#### ADDITIONAL MATERIALS:

- **About the author and the importance behind the book:** Amanda Marsico started writing *Acephalous* at 14-years-old. Its original version was an award-winning short story written for a county high school competition. It went through many variations and revisions over the years, sometimes sitting on a shelf untouched for years at a time. After graduating college, Amanda decided to finish what she started. After 12 years of work and revisions, it became a full-fledged novel. In addition to the long labor of love that went into it, a lot of Amanda's personal influences served as inspiration. Although none of the characters are fully based any one real-life person, and many events and problems in the book have never happened to Amanda, each dream sequence used in the story was taken from real dreams she had. It was fun to turn a scary moment asleep into a creative moment while awake.

Amanda felt this story was important to tell because it shows a main character who is not always likeable, who often makes terrible decisions, and who struggles between wanting more for herself and wanting to be someone else altogether. Breena tries to find answers and relief in the wrong places and through the wrong methods. The series seeks to show the messy process of growth and improvement of its main character's mental health, morals, and approach to life—ways in which all teens (and adults) grow as they gain life experience. Many readers will say that Breena is an irritating main character, but that's not a negative critique for this book. She was created with these flaws because she had to start out at her personal low in order to show change. Breena does have a redemption

story, and it takes all 3 series novels to get there because life, especially in Breena's extraordinary circumstances, is hard work on a road filled with pot holes.

- **Plot diagram next page**

# PLOT CHART

CLIMAX (big moment, turning point):

Falling Actions (results of the climax, solving minor problems, winding down):

*Rising Actions (events, complications, story progress that leads to the big moment)*

Resolution (ending, solution to original problem from exposition):

EXPOSITION/BEGINNING (setting, characters, internal conflict, external conflict):