

THE MIRROR: BOOK ONE

BASIC TRAINING

Educator's Guide · Kateryn Cole

Ages 8–12 · Grades 3–7 · 29,500 words · 17 chapters

This guide is optional scaffolding, not a program. Take the questions you want and ignore the rest. Nothing here requires prep beyond having read the chapter.

Permission: teachers and librarians may photocopy and distribute any part of this guide for classroom or library use.

About the book

Two twelve-year-olds are pulled through a bathroom mirror into a hallway with six doors. Five are unlocked video game worlds, each holding a key to the sixth. A mistake inside a door costs a life and you try again; failing a whole door costs a strike, and three strikes and the hallway keeps you. Behind the door they choose is Marcus, thirteen, who has been alone in there for two years.

Content notes for teachers. There is cartoon-style game violence (the boys shoot at figures that behave like video game enemies) and one real injury — a character is grazed. **No character dies.** The emotional weight sits in isolation and waiting, not in grief. No romance, no profanity. The hardest material is Chapter 10, where the boys understand how alone Marcus has been; some readers will need to talk about it.

Discussion questions by section

Each set runs about fifteen minutes. Questions marked **[W]** have no right answer and work well as writing prompts instead of discussion.

Chapters 1–3 • The house, and the mirror

1. Jr counts things — stairs, ceiling tiles, the seconds in a pattern. What does the book tell us about him before anything strange happens?
2. Dakota decides things and Jr works out whether they're possible. Find a moment in Chapter 1 that shows this. Which of the two are you?
3. **[W]** Jr notices his house is quieter this year. His sister has left for college. Why might the author start a book about a mirror with a boy noticing a quiet house?
4. Jr knocks on the doorframe instead of the door, because after ten o'clock that's the rule. What does one small habit like that tell you about a family?

Chapters 4–6 • The hallway

5. Jr's first response to an impossible hallway is to count the doors and listen at each one. Is that brave, or is it something else?
6. The boys can tell what's behind four doors by sound alone. What does each sound promise? Which door would you have opened first, and why?
7. The sixth door makes no sound at all. Why is silence more frightening here than noise?
8. **[W]** The rules are never explained to them. Lives are cheap, strikes are permanent — they work that out. Write about a time you had to figure out the rules of something while already inside it.

Chapters 7–9 • Door Two, and the patrol

9. Dakota recognizes the world as a game and it makes him confident. Jr recognizes it as a system and it makes him careful. Who is right?
10. In Chapter 9, Jr insists that whatever he saw in the doorway *hid* — and that a game enemy doesn't hide. He says: "That's not a pattern. That's a decision." What is the difference, and why does it change everything?
11. Dakota takes Jr seriously at exactly the moment Jr sounds least reasonable. What does that say about their friendship?

Chapter 10 • Marcus and the shelves — *the heart of the book*

12. Marcus has sorted every object he has ever found. Ammunition by size. Seven identical grenades all facing the same way. Why order things that don't need ordering?
13. The last shelf holds things that are no use at all: a bent spoon, a radio with no back, a child's shoe. Jr realizes "that was the row that said a person lived here." What does he mean?

14. Marcus ground the edges of a piece of broken window glass smooth. Jr finds this the hardest detail of all. Why that one?
15. [W] Marcus straightens the shelf twice a day so the day has a beginning and an end. Name something you do that isn't necessary but makes a day feel like a day.
16. Marcus has been alone for two years and has never seen another kid. Before the boys arrive, he has no way of knowing whether anyone else exists. What would that do to a person?

Chapters 11–13 • The shoe, the gunner, and the first failure

17. Marcus keeps a size-two shoe, kid-sized glasses, and four scratches on a wall. What has he worked out that he cannot prove?
18. Jr's plan works perfectly and that is exactly why it fails: "It didn't feel like a risk. It felt like arithmetic." What is the difference between being right and being safe?
19. After the failure, Jr says it out loud on purpose — "I'm putting it somewhere I can find it." Why does naming a mistake help?
20. Dakota says making jokes is "my entire personality," and Jr tells him not to do the joke thing right now. Is Jr being a good friend or a harsh one?
21. [W] The red circle doesn't buzz or flash. It just glows, "patient and unhurried." Why is that worse than an alarm?

Chapters 14–17 • The tower, and four doors left

22. When the world is beaten, the constant noise stops — and Marcus stands in silence for the first time in two years. Why does the author make the reward *quiet*?
 23. Marcus can tell them everything and cannot come with them. What does that cost him, and why does he help anyway?
 24. Dakota admits his brain still calls Marcus "the guy from the shooter door," and it's only been twenty minutes. Why does that bother him so much?
 25. The boys invent a way to carry names and details from door to door without paper. Why is remembering someone correctly treated as a serious job in this book?
 26. [W] The book ends with four doors left and someone talking behind one of them. What do you predict, and what in the text supports it?
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Activities

Short (one class period)

The inventory. Marcus owns about sixty objects. List the sixty things you would keep, in order. Then mark which ones are useful and which ones are the ones that say a person lives here.

Listening at doors. Describe a place using only sound — no sight words at all. Trade with a partner and see if they can name the place.

Four facts. Marcus repeats back four things about the boys so he won't lose them. Interview a classmate, take four facts, and say them back from memory a day later. Discuss what it felt like to be remembered accurately.

Longer (a week)

Design the sixth door. Invent a world behind one of the four unopened doors: its rules, what it sounds like through the door, the object that serves as its key, and the kid who has been stuck in it. How long have they been there, and what have they done with the time?

The four scratches. Someone scratched four lines into a wall and stopped. Write that person's story in one page.

Pattern journal. Jr survives by noticing what repeats. Keep a three-day log of patterns in your own life — bus timings, a sibling's habits, the hallway between classes. What could you predict by the third day?

Cross-curricular

Math. The patrol runs a six-count, a four-count and a nine-count. When are all three simultaneously at the far end of the loop? (Lowest common multiple, with an actual reason to care.)

Science. Marcus tests whether a wall is load-bearing by destroying it. Design a test that answers the same question without destroying anything.

Writing. Rewrite any scene in Chapter 13 from Dakota's point of view.

Standards

The questions in this guide support these Common Core ELA anchor strands for grades 3–7. Strand numbering is given without grade-level suffixes so you can match it to your own state’s framing.

Reading Literature — textual evidence (Q10, 13, 17, 26 all require quoting the page) **Reading Literature — theme and central idea** (Q12–16, 22, 25) **Reading Literature — character development and interaction** (Q2, 9, 11, 20, 23)

Reading Literature — word choice and tone (Q7, 21) **Reading Literature — point of view** (the Chapter 13 rewrite activity; Q9) **Speaking and Listening — collaborative discussion** (all) **Writing — narrative** (all [W] questions, “Design the sixth door”, “The four scratches”)

A letter from the author

Dear teachers and librarians,

This book started with a haircut.

My son was twelve. I had the scissors, he was facing the bathroom mirror, and there is a second mirror on the wall behind that one, so his reflection went back and back and back until it was too small to be a face. He looked at it and asked what if that’s another world. What if I got pulled in.

He was a what-if kid. He handed me impossible situations constantly and wanted them talked all the way through, and “I don’t know” was never an acceptable answer. So we stood there and worked it out — what would be over there, what the rules would be, how you’d get out. The hallway came from that. Then the doors. Then we got stuck on the only question that mattered, which was what is behind them, and we decided on video game worlds because a kid his age would already understand how each one worked without being taught.

And then we decided the most important thing in the book, standing in a bathroom: there had to be a way out. However bad it got in there, it had to be a place that could be beaten.

That decision is why this book is what it is. The danger is real — a boy named Marcus has been in there for two years and my readers will worry about him — but the hallway is not hopeless, and no child in six books is ever confirmed dead.

The word the series uses is *kept*. I wrote it for readers who want to be genuinely frightened and then genuinely all right.

I started writing when he was thirteen. I finished this year. He is nineteen now and serving in the Marine Corps, and the boy in the book is still twelve, which is the arrangement I have made with myself.

One more thing, since you are the ones who will hand this to a reluctant reader: my daughter has read every draft of every book with me, often over the phone, paragraph by paragraph. The thing she catches most often is a word that is too old for the age range. I have taken every one of those notes. If a sentence in here is too hard for a ten-year-old, it is because we both missed it, not because we thought they wouldn't mind.

Thank you for putting books in front of children. If you use any of this, I would genuinely love to hear about it.

Kateryn Cole

The series

All six books are written. A class that starts the series will not be left waiting on an unfinished one.

Book One — *Basic Training* · October 5, 2026 **Book Two — *Extra Life*** · November 16, 2026 **Book Three — *Full Throttle*** · January 4, 2027 **Book Four — *Critical Hit*** · February 19, 2027 **Book Five — *Freeze Frame*** · April 5, 2027 **Book Six — *Game Over*** · May 17, 2027

Kateryn Cole is available for school and library visits, in person or virtual, anywhere in Louisiana.

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