

STRAIGHTLING Discussion Questions

Chapter 1

The narrator, Cyndy, has strong feelings about Monroe versus Bridgeport. What is Monroe like? Bridgeport? Why does she prefer the one she does? Which would you like better, and why?

How does Cyndy feel about smoking pot? What is her internal conflict? Why does she smoke? Is that a good reason? Have you ever faced a similar struggle—not necessarily with drugs, but with feeling like you had to do something in order to be liked? How did you handle it?

When a person comes in and lays down next to Cyndy on the waterbed, she starts thinking about a song she sang in elementary school. Why? How does thinking about that song help her? What else could she have done to help herself? What would have been the pros and cons of that alternative choice?

Chapter 2

At the start of the third paragraph, and again in paragraph eight, Cyndy talks directly to the reader, saying, “So I did. Well—well screw you!” Is that something you’ve seen other authors do? What did you think or feel when you read that line? Why might a person in Cyndy’s situation talk to the reader, someone who can’t possibly answer her?

As Cyndy is running away from her house, she describes what it looks and feels like in her neighborhood and at the nearby schools, Chalk Hill and Fawn Hollow. Do you believe places can have a certain “vibe,” even when there are no people around? Or do you think the bad vibes she feels are just a reflection of her own emotions? Fawn Hollow Elementary, where she hides and smokes a cigarette, is the school where the Sandy Hook Elementary students finished the year, after the massacre. Does that fact change your answer about whether buildings can have a vibe?

Cyndy says she knows some families who have taken kids in, but they don’t invite her. She says, “I must be wicked annoying.” Do you think that’s the reason? If not, why hasn’t anybody invited her to live with them?

Chapter 3

The author uses a lot of figurative language. She says things using images and comparisons,

rather than stating exactly what she means. Examples: “I see her and my heard drops its barbell” and “My veins have little doors at their ends. As soon as we cross into Bridgeport they snap open, and all this air rushes in.” Why do you think she tells the story this way? Does speaking in images tell you about her personality or how she views the world? Or is it done to create a certain mood for the reader? As a reader, do you like reading this style of writing, or would you prefer a more straight forward style? Why?

When Cyndy gets to her boyfriend Steve’s house, she realizes she’s never really *seen* him before. And yet...she’s going out with him. Can you really be going out with a person if you don’t even know what he or she looks like? Now that she can see him, he grosses her out. But she fools around with him anyway. Why? Can you come up with a bunch of different reasons, based on what you know about Cyndy’s life?

Chapter 4

On the first page of this chapter, while hanging out with Joanna, Cyndy says, “I feel really lame all of a sudden, the way I used to feel with Kim when her friends were around.” Why do certain social situations make kids feel lame? Next Cyndy says, “A cigarette’d fix it....” Would a cigarette fix it? Why? What else could she do to feel not-lame?

It seems like the guidance counselor really wants to help Cyndy, but doesn’t quite know how to talk to her. What advice do you have for adults who want to reach out to an angry or struggling teen? What should they say and do? *Not* say and *not* do?

Chapter 5

Cyndy says, “The way other kids get their needs met by family, I get what I need from my music.” Is it possible for music to replace family? What else could kids use to fill the need for love and family? What are the not-so-good things teens do, to try to fill that need? How about this: come up with two lists. One: “Not-Good Substitutes for Family Love”; two: “Good Substitutes for Family Love.” Post ‘em on a classroom wall.

Chapter 6

Cyndy says, “I’m a rockstar in the pit now.” What gave her rockstar status? In your school, would this turn a lame kid into a cool one? By the way, is Cyndy as lame as she thinks she is? If yes, what makes her so lame? Could she do anything to stop being lame? If she’s not lame, why does she think she is?

Trying to be cool, Cyndy talks all the time about smoking pot, when in reality, she doesn't even know how. Do a lot of kids do this? Why would being a stoner make someone seem cool? What else makes a person seem cool?

If you were told you were going to foster care, how would you feel? Cyndy is excited about it. Does that make you infer anything? In other words, does her excitement make you suddenly understand things about Cyndy and her life, even though the text didn't come right out and say them?

Chapter 7

What stands out the most to Cyndy about Janus House? Overall, does she like or dislike this aspect of the place? Do you think you would like living in Janus House? Does Cyndy? Do her feelings about staying there make sense to you? Why or why not?

Most people do things only when they themselves will get some benefit from it: do you agree or disagree with that statement? Why do you think Shirley, who rarely spoke to Cyndy's mother, called her and told her about this Straight place she saw on the news?

Chapter 8

When they arrive at the "boarding school," all the kids Cyndy sees look like robots. What's up with that? What did you think was going on in this scene?

Easiest. Question. Ever. What did you think of how Cyndy's mother acted when she was leaving? How would most mothers act? Based on what you've heard about her, why do you think she acted this way?

Chapter 9

In the opening scene of this chapter, when the staff guy says "Bend over," Cyndy says, "And I bend. Do I have a choice?" So...does she? Wait. Before you answer that, go back and reread the last two pages of chapter eight, to refresh your memory. Where was she? Who was in the room with her? Based on what you learned about those people, if Cyndy decided to refuse, what do you think would have happened to her? If you want to *see* what would've happened, find a computer and go to www.cyndyettler.com/books/.

This one isn't a question, it's a dare. Which of you guys doesn't care what anyone else thinks?

Quick, stand up! Okay, you standing? You're going to act out a scene from this chapter. Maybe for extra credit, teach? Candy? A little pencil? Okay, here we go. After her intake, Cyndy is brought into a giant room, an open warehouse, where hundreds of kids' bodies form a "beast." She says the beast looks like it's fighting itself. Reread that next paragraph, Cyndy's description of what this beast is doing...and then, do exactly that yourself.

How did you do? That mess is called "motivating." You'll learn more about it soon, but to see a picture of it, go back to www.cyndyetler.com/books/ .

Use a dictionary, a computer, or a brilliant classmate to find out what "irony" is. Then explain why this sentence is ironic: "LOVE YA, JAMIE!" the beast screams in one massive voice." Does it seem like they love her? This place is obviously weird, but there is a reason behind every single thing that happens here. Can you think of any reasons a teen-controlling place like this might have all the kids saying "Love ya" to each other?

Chapter 10

When Sandy's dad hugs Cyndy, she's surprised that she actually enjoys it. In her own mind she asks him, "How have you forgiven me, Sandy's dad? And um, do you know what I did wrong?" What *did* she do wrong? Anything? Was it enough to get her sent to this place, Straight? If not, why is she here? Do kids often feel like they've "done something wrong," when they haven't? Or do they feel like they've done nothing wrong, when they have? Can you give examples?

During the van ride, Sandy tells Cyndy she's a Straightling. What *is* a Straightling? Remember how I said everything they do in Straight, they do it for a reason? Keeping that in mind, why do you think the kids were given a weird title like "Straightling," rather than being called "kids" or "teens" or "students"?

In the bathroom, Cyndy realizes just how trapped she is, literally locked up in this stranger's house, hundreds of miles from anyone she knows. She needs some "private time," but she's not getting it. On top of all that, she is humiliated and insulted by Sandy, her captor. How do you think Cyndy wanted to react in this situation? How did she act, instead? Why?

Continuing with that last scene: in what other situations might a teen feel humiliated and insulted by an authority figure? How can a teen handle that situation without making it worse for his or herself?

When Cyndy gives Sandy her clothes, she says she's handing over "the last shreds" of herself. For teenagers, do clothes=self? Do teens "lose themselves" if they can't wear their own style?

How about adults: do they lose themselves when they have to dress a certain way for their job? If there is a difference in your answer for teens versus adults, why do you think this is?

Chapter 11

When Cyndy tells Sandy she's not going to wear the barrette, Sandy says, "Yes you are, Cyndy. Now take it and slap your bangs back...." Go get yourself a definition for the word "diction." Got it? Okay. Sandy doesn't say "clip" your bangs back, or "pin" or "pull" your bangs back. She says "slap." Have someone read Sandy's words out loud, exactly as they appear above. Then read them aloud *again*, substituting "clip," "pin" and "pull" for "slap." Does changing that single word, "slap," change the whole feeling of the sentence? Why do you think the author used the diction she did?

Pretty much every sentence Cyndy hears from these Straight people uses threatening or violent diction. How do you think this would affect a young teenager over time, when she hears it day in and day out?

What words and messages would a teen hear throughout their life, if their parents went to college and there was always enough money to take care of the basics? What words and messages would a teen hear if their parents had dropped out of high school, and there was never enough money for food, rent, and electricity? Fast forward ten years. How are these two former teens' lives probably different from each other's? Can teens change the way they see the world and their future, no matter what messages they grew up with? How?

Cyndy is crushed when, instead of being excited to see her, Scott Deutermeier just says, "Okay, Cyndy," and looks away. Afterwards, when the demon lifts her hands to make her motivate, she doesn't try to fight it. Why does she stop fighting? Does this give you an inference (an educated guess based on clues) about where the book is going? If a group or organization wanted to break someone's will, how do you think they would do it?

Chapter 12

At the start of this chapter Cyndy says, "I couldn't do another night at that house....I needed, just, to die. But prayers aren't answered quick like that, so I lived." Did she really want to die? Do you think you would recognize it if someone in your school felt that way? Truthfully: would you want to help him or her, even if they weren't "cool" or in your group of friends? Aside from the obvious "tell an adult," what could another teen do to help a suicidally depressed peer? You can share your ideas on my website at www.cyndyetler.com/teens/.

Amanda is the ultimate badass chick, but when Cyndy looks at her eyes, they're "anything but tough." Are the toughest kids truly fearless, or are they actually soft and scared inside? If they're only tough on the outside, does that give you new ideas on how to deal with bullies? Share your good ones on my website at www.cyndyetler.com/teens/.

Chapter 13

At the start of this chapter, Matt King seems to search Cyndy out. He tells her to stand, and as soon as she does, the hands of all the other kids fly up around her. Does it help those kids, somehow, to join Matt in being mean to Cyndy? Does it benefit kids in regular life to join in when one kid is singled out for teasing? In your life, what would happen if someone stood up for the teased kid, saying, like, "He's alright. Leave him alone"?

Cyndy keeps saying she's going to get out of Straight on her third day. Why does she keep bringing it up? Are there any clues that give you the inference that she's right? Are there any clues that give you the inference that she's wrong? What do you think will happen to her mind and like, her "spirit," if she doesn't get out on day three?

When Amanda is being taken down, Matt King is happy. Why? He commands the group to watch as she's carried, screaming, out of the room. Why? (Hint: remember, everything that happens in Straight is geared toward one main goal.)

As a rule for a group or society, what does "The nail that sticks up must be hammered down" mean? Why would a society want its members to follow this rule? Does American culture demand that we follow that rule? Do any of the groups in your life expect you to?

Chapter 14

In the opening scene, a "side stander" squeezes between Cyndy and the girl next to her. The side stander writes down what the girl whispers in her ear. This is one of the few moments in the book where teens seem to bond or "feel close"—but Cyndy is definitely not included. This whispering secrets, making sure the other kid is excluded and knows it—is this how teen girls bond? Do we feel closer to one person by making sure other people aren't allowed in the group?

It seems like everything a bully does is designed to exclude someone. In music, on TV, and throughout history, people have stood back and observed as others are excluded, bullied, even hurt and killed. Can you think of examples, especially in today's teen culture? For starters: someone in the hallway right now yells "Fight!" What do you do? Yeah. So: why do people

enjoy perpetrating and watching damage done to others? If kids were to stop excluding each other, do you think we would stop hearing about school shootings? Why or why not?

Chapter 15

Have you ever known anyone like Lucy, the mean blond smiler? How was that person like Lucy? Did other people like that person? Did you? Why?

When people are in situations where they are controlled by others—prisons, concentration camps, psych wards, etc—how do you think they feel? Do they have any way of getting those feelings out? What would happen if they acted the way they probably want to: punching, screaming, or cursing out the guards? Are there any other ways they could deal with their feelings?

In Straight, the kids are only allowed to vent their feelings in one way. How?

[Answer alert!] The Straight experience fills kids with rage and terror. The Straightlings then blast their rage at the other kids who are stood up, one at a time. Keeping in mind that the “blasted” kid is trapped there 24 hours a day, surrounded by the kids who just attacked him or her: what do you think he or she would have to do, to avoid being attacked again? Do you think they would do it? If they would do it, would it be easy or hard? If they wouldn’t, what do you think would happen to them over time, for refusing to conform?

Are there any groups in our society that force people to hurt each other for acceptance? Why would a group operate this way?

Is Cyndy a druggie? Why does Straight want her to “confess” that she is a druggie?

Chapter 16

Cyndy’s mother leaves her a bag with horrible things in it, and Cyndy says she is “getting back at me for just everything, with these pants.” In Hallmark cards and fairy tales, mothers are 100% unselfish and loving. In real life, are most mothers this way? Should they be? What other qualities should a mother of a teenager possess? Why?

Holy crap you guys, WHAT did they do to Amanda? Why was she singled out for such extreme treatment? In your school or family, do the kids who stay quiet around “authority” have an easier time than the rebellious fighters? Who are you more like: the rebellious Amanda or the

eager-to-be-accepted Cyndy? Would your life be easier if you tried to act more like the other type? If yes, how?

Chapter 17

In the rap where kids have to say how long they were on first phase, everybody is laughing and having fun except Max W., the kid who was on first phase the longest: 16 months. Cyndy says, “If you ask me, Max W. kinda looks like he could cry.” Although you don’t hear a lot about him in the book, Max W. was a very sweet, very sad boy who was never, not once, mean to another Straightling. He was suicidally depressed, but Straight didn’t allow medication or “outside therapy.” So Max W. was just always quiet, and always in pain. It was especially hard to watch him get stood up and confronted.

Please do not say any names out loud, because the last thing a sad kid needs is to have other kids talking about him. But: do you know or see any teens who remind you of Max W.? Can you make any (non-judgmental) inferences about why he or she seems so sad? Is there anything nice you can do for him or her?

Do you think Cyndy’s friends are going to come rescue her? Why or why not? Realistically, would your friends try to rescue you? Even if they lived 12 hours away, didn’t have cars, and didn’t know where you were? What can Cyndy do if her friends don’t come to save her?

Chapter 18

Why did Cyndy start doing the Straightling stuff, the hand signs and motivating? How did she feel when she started doing these things?

Do you think it’s basic human nature to want to be part of a group? What happens to kids who always feel different and rejected from the group?

Should the “in” members of a society try to draw those excluded members in, as well? If they did draw them in, would that benefit only the excluded person, or would it benefit everyone in the society?

List the ways that kids try to find a feeling of acceptance. Put a big checkmark by the ones that seem positive. For kids who are currently using the more negative behaviors on the list, would the positive ones work, instead? Would those kids actually *try* the positive ones? If yes, would they work? If not, why?

Oookay, what the **bleep** is going on with Blurry Lip's "confession"? Does it seem like she's telling the truth? If yes, why did she tell everyone that? If no, well, why did she tell everyone that?! Getting kids to "confess" to stuff like this: is it part of Straight's plan? If yes, why? What *is* Straight's plan? Can you tell yet?

Chapter 19

Amanda admits to some painful stuff about boys not liking her because of how she looks. What does "society" tell us we should do, if people aren't attracted to us? Where do we get these messages? Make a chart of the sources—specific TV shows, magazines, movies, songs, stores—that deliver those messages. On a new chart, list any sources that tell us to accept ourselves, to do what makes us *feel* good, rather than *look* good. (I'd love it if you would post those on www.cyndyetler.com/teens!) What do you think would happen if you stopped paying attention to the sources in the first chart, and started paying more attention to the sources on the second one?

In thinking back on her life, Cyndy realizes a big turning point came when she "turned old enough to fight" against what was going on at home. For a lot of kids, they hit 13 and suddenly, they've got a mouth. Are you a kid who suddenly started standing up for yourself? With adults *and* kids, or only with one or the other?

Kids who "have a mouth" often get written up, kicked out of class, suspended, and worse. Are there ways that teens can stand up for themselves without getting in trouble? How?

Find some more wall space and make another chart. On this one, list all the ways you can come up with for how to stand up for yourself without getting in trouble. Include exact phrases such as, "I see what you're saying, I just see it differently" or, "Okay, I'll do that. Can I have five minutes to finish what I'm doing?"

When her fifth-phaser is stood up for spit therapy, Cyndy recognizes the shock on her face, because that had been Cyndy herself getting screamed at, the Friday before. But this time, Cyndy is motivating for the chance to stand and scream at the girl. "This time, I'm part of the killer beast," she says. "This time's way, way better." Have you ever gone from being the victim to being the bully? Do you remember how it felt to become the one giving pain, instead of receiving it?

With this in mind, let's go back to the topic of school shootings. If a kid has felt bullied and excluded for their whole life, over time, do you think they might become furious, and desperate to switch to the powerful bully role?

Do you think that small moments of being included and accepted by peers could, over time, build up and prevent a teen from reaching that point of desperation? If yes, list (wall chart!) some small (or big!) ways that teens can help an outsider feel in.

Chapter 20

“Head chant”? “Druggie music”? “Got honest with myself”? Um...what happened to Cyndy? Is she still Cyndy?

Chapter 21

True story: it's 26 years after that day when I saw Joanna again, after all that time in Straight. I am now grownup Cyndy. But as I re-read that scene, my feelings are still so intense, I can't come up with any discussion questions. So...you do it! First: how come I could come up with questions for the twenty prior chapters, but not for this one super-important scene? Second, what discussion questions *should* I have, about seeing Joanna again? If you want, share 'em at www.cyndyetler.com/teens.

When Cyndy returned to her high school after Straight, she acted like she was from outer space. Would it be realistic or fair to expect the church youth group kids to do anything other than laugh at her? If yes, how could they have interacted with a kid whose whole worldview was so different from theirs?

Cyndy feels so unsafe and desperate, she'd rather be dead and in heaven than alive and outside of Straight. She even has a plan for killing herself. Why doesn't she do it?

Make a list of reasons—every single tiny one—you have for being alive. If you like this kind of stuff, make it cute. Decorate it, or fold it into an origami frog, or shellac it onto a wooden board or something. Hold onto it, and pull it out when everything feels icky. If you ever feel truly desperate, you can find help at the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), or www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/GetHelp.

The adults at the Trumbull AA meetings give Cyndy what she always needed: a feeling of being cared for, liked and listened to. Are there any non-money things you crave from adults? What are they? Just becoming really clear on what you want and need can make it, like, magically appear in your life. So keep your manipulator-radar up, but keep your eyes and mind open. Maybe a cool new teacher or mentor is about to walk into your life.

Epilogue

So, now: what was Straight Inc's objective? Let's break down each step of the process they used to meet their goal.

What did they do to get parents to bring their kid in for an "evaluation"?

How did they convince parents that their kids were druggies?

Why did they make kids say they were addicts? *How* did they make kids say it? By the way, do you think most of the kids in Straight were addicts? Why or why not? Use clues from the text.

How did Straight keep parents and the public from knowing what was going on inside the building?

Once parents were finally allowed to see their kid again, what was the kid like? What kinds of things did he or she say? How did this make the parents feel about Straight?

What did the parents do, once they heard their kid say "I'm a druggie" and "I love you, Mom and Dad"?

Who did Straight actually benefit?

How did Straight manage to keep its license to operate for so long?

Why was the "memo about program procedures" sent out? Did Straight follow those procedures? Is there some irony in that whole thing?

Cyndy describes a psychological phenomenon called Stockholm Syndrome, where captives change and become like their captors, in order to be safe. Do you think a similar dynamic exists in the average American high school? If so, how? Why?

Are you cool with kids wanting to be similar to others in order to be accepted, or would you rather have all teens practice nonconformity? (What's nonconformity? C'mon. Didn't we talk about making inferences? Ready....go!) If you would rather resist conformity, how can you do that without making yourself a target for bullies and excluders?

Do you see anything—your peers, your school, the reasons kids might use drugs, the reasons kids act out, whatever—in a new light after reading this book?

If this is the first book you've enjoyed reading in a long time, will you please, *please* find and read more good YA books?