



A Reading Group Guide to:

We Are the Ants

By Shaun David Hutchinson

About This Book

All Henry wanted was to be left alone, to live his life in peace. But that was not to be. King-of-the-jocks Marcus won't leave him alone, alternating between bullying Henry and hooking up with him. His grandmother won't leave him alone, as she needs more and more help from her family as she slides into dementia. His brother, Charlie, continues his brotherly torture of Henry, even with the distraction of a pregnant girlfriend. The kids at school won't leave him alone—most of them taunt him mercilessly, while Audrey and Diego insist on trying to get close. Even the memory of his former boyfriend, Jesse,

who committed suicide, continues to haunt him. But worst of all are the sluggers, the aliens who have been regularly abducting Henry since he was young. They have stepped up their game, presenting him with a terrible choice.

The sluggers know when the world is going to end, and they are forcing Henry to decide whether or not to save it. But how can Henry be persuaded to save a world that seems to contain nothing but suffering for everyone on it? Does saving humanity mean letting them be destroyed, or forcing them to continue their pitiful lives?

Discussion Questions

1. *We Are the Ants* begins with a quote by famous sci-fi writer Arthur C. Clarke, "Two possibilities exist: either we are alone in the universe or we are not. Both are equally terrifying." Why do you think the author chose these words to be the first that you see? What does it tell you about the story that is to come? Does your understanding of the quote change throughout the course of the book?
2. Why is the book called *We Are the Ants*? What relation does Henry's hypothetical ant have to the human race? How does all this fit into Henry's overall theory on the purpose of life? Does the meaning of Henry's statement "We are the ants" change from the beginning of the book to the end?
3. Henry says of Jesse: "He didn't kill himself because of a single overwhelming problem; he died from a thousand tiny wounds." What are some of these tiny wounds? Why does Henry blame himself for Jesse's suicide? What effects does the suicide have on Henry's life now?
4. Nobody seems to understand why Henry allows Marcus into his life. What does Henry see in Marcus that the others can't? Are there any other reasons that Henry thinks he should be with Marcus? Why is Marcus attracted to Henry? How does their relationship change over the course of the story?

5. In the doomsday scenario “The Meteor,” Frieda Eichman watches the meteor named after her father destroy the earth, and she whispers a phrase in German that translates to “I’ve missed you so much, Papa.” Do you think she regrets naming the meteor after her father? What does it mean to her that the world is ending? Do any of the other characters in the book have similarly fraught relationships with their fathers?

6. Why does Audrey want Henry to be part of her life again? Why does he continue to push her away? What do you think is the turning point that allows them to be friends again?

7. Why do science and math appeal to Henry so much? What do these two subjects offer that he doesn’t get from the other aspects of his life? How does his interest in science help him deal with all the things that happen to him?

8. How does Nana describe her Alzheimer’s disease? How does Henry feel about her decline? What effect does her disease have on the different members of Henry’s family?

9. Henry comes up with a number of different possible doomsday scenarios for how the world could end. What does his ability to think up all these catastrophes tell you about what kind of person he is? Do any of the scenarios reflect on how he feels about his fellow man? Do any of these seem likely to ever happen?

10. How does the nickname “Space Boy” impact Henry’s life? What things—good or bad—come from his reputation? Does it have any effect on his ability to form new relationships?

11. Immediately after Henry is attacked in the shower, he says, “I wish I were dead. Because you can only die once, but you can suffer forever.” Do you think he truly believes this? What events from his life would lend credence to this statement?

12. Why does Henry agree, at one point, to press the button if the sluggers don’t make him return to earth? Why do you think they do not agree to this proposition? What do they offer him instead?

13. What do Diego’s paintings reveal about his past and his emotional state? Is there another way that Henry could have learned so much about Diego? Does Diego’s painting of Henry capture who he is? If so, how?

14. Diego does not believe in letting the past define him, instead choosing to focus on the moment he’s in and what he can make of his future. Does Henry agree with this philosophy? What does Henry stand to lose if he lets go of his past?

15. Does Henry believe that there is a pattern and a meaning to life? In what ways would believing in fate help him deal with his emotions? Do his views change over the course of the book?

16. Why doesn’t Henry push the button when he is first given the choice? At what point does he change his mind? What makes him decide that the world is worth saving? Would Henry’s friends and family have pressed the button?

17. Which of the people in Henry's life have abandoned him? Why does he feel responsible for these desertions?
18. How does the prospect of being a father change Charlie? Do Henry's attitudes toward Charlie also change during the course of the story? How does the addition of Zoey change the family dynamic?
19. At one point, Henry says that Jesse was "definitely the best of me." Why would he think that? What do you think is the best part of Henry? What would his friends and family say is his best quality?
20. What do you make of the document that Henry turned in for his Chemistry extra credit assignment? Why did he turn that in? Is this what Ms. Faraci had in mind for the assignment? Was Henry emotionally ready at the beginning of the story to share his thoughts and experiences with his teacher?
21. Discuss your thoughts on the book's ending. Were the sluggers real? Did Henry have a chance to change the world?

Extension Activities

1. Jesse isn't able to conquer his demons, and chooses to end his life. Find out if there is a suicide hotline or some sort of peer counseling group in your area with which you can volunteer.
2. Henry wonders if the sluggers communicate through the secretion of chemicals like insects, or through codified movements like bees. Choose an insect or animal, and research how they communicate. Write a short essay about your findings.
3. Write your own end-of-the-world scenario, like those that Henry imagined. Can you also think of a solution to your doomsday scenario? If so, write it into the ending of your story.
4. Henry is bullied by his fellow classmates—particularly Marcus—and it makes his life miserable. Do you have an anti-bullying initiative at your school? If so, how can you support these efforts? If not, come up with a plan to combat bullying and propose it to your counselor or principal.
5. Create a self-portrait that captures a significant moment in your life, your emotional state, or your true essence. You can use paint, like Diego does, or choose another medium, such as drawing, photography, collage, etc.
6. Henry's extra credit project takes the form of a journal. If you do not already keep a journal, start one now. Keep track of the events in your life and how you feel about them.
7. Astronomy is an important part of Henry's life, helping him make sense of what's happening to him and his place in the world. Choose a topic from the world of astronomy to learn more about, and write a report about what you discover.

8. As baby boomers get older, more and more people are suffering from Alzheimer's. The Alzheimer's Association is doing excellent work, raising funds and doing research. Find your local chapter and pitch in. And learn more about the organization: <http://www.alz.org/>.

9. Henry's mom is a trained chef, but it's not until the end of the book that she begins to take pleasure in cooking again. Choose a dish that you've never made before, and learn to make it. Or, if you've never cooked before, try taking a cooking class to learn the basics!

Guide written in 2017 by Cory Grimminck, Director of the Portland District Library in Michigan.

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