

# THE GRAY by Chris Baron

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***The Gray* is a sensitively told middle grade story from Chris Baron about living with anxiety and finding ways to cope.**

It's been a tough year for Sasha—he's been bullied at his middle school and his anxiety, which he calls the Gray, is growing. Sasha's dad tells him to "toughen up"—and he does, but with unfortunate, hurtful results. His parents and therapist agree that a summer in the country with his aunt might be the best medicine, but it's the last place he wants to be. He'll be away from his best friend, video games, and stuck in the house that reminds him of his beloved uncle who died two years earlier.

His aunt is supportive, and there are lots of places to explore, and even some potential new friends. When Sasha is introduced at a local ranch to a horse coincidentally--incredibly --nicknamed the Gray, he feels he's found a kindred spirit.

But his own Gray is ever-present. When one of his new friends disappears, Sasha discovers that the country is wilder and more mysterious than he imagined. He tries to muster enough courage to help in the search...but will the Gray hold him back?



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Chris Baron** is a professor of English at San Diego City College. He's also the author of the (adult) poetry collection, *Lantern Tree*, which was published as part of a poetry anthology, *Under the Broom Tree*, winner of the San Diego Book Award. He lives in San Diego, California, with his wife and their three children. *All of Me* is his first novel.

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## STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What does the cover of *The Gray* tell you about the story? Look at the illustrations, fonts used, the overall design.
- Sasha loves playing and designing video games with his friend. Do you have a favorite video game? Why do you enjoy it?
- It seems like too much time on the screen (playing games, at school, coding) is creating some challenges for Sasha—so he needs a break. Do you think it can be helpful in taking a break from screen-related activities? What are some non-screen related activities you enjoy?
- Friendship is an important theme in *The Gray*. In what ways are Eli and Ivy good friends to each other? In what ways do they face challenges in their friendships, with one another and with others?
- At the start of the story, Sasha is often told by his father to “toughen up,” but this is hard for Sasha to do. Are there any phrases that you are sometimes told that are difficult for you to understand?
- Throughout the story, Sasha is often bullied or teased for his personality and his reactions to situations—especially when he is dealing with his anxiety,
  - what are some examples of this from the book?
  - how does Sasha react in these situations, and why?
  - how do you feel about his reactions? Do you think he makes good choices?
- When Sasha’s anxiety gets really challenging, Sasha experiences difficult changes in his mind and body. He calls this The Gray. Do you ever experience anything like this?—something that might be a “Gray” of your own?
- With the help of his family, his doctor, and his friends, Sasha learns ways to cope with his anxiety. What are some of the techniques Sasha uses? Are you familiar with any of these techniques?
- In the book, Sasha had some not-so good experiences riding horses, but this changes as the story goes on. How?
- Sasha finds what he calls a “kindred” spirit with Star (who incredibly has a nickname—The Gray!) What similarities do Sasha and Star share? What impact does riding and

being around horses have For Sasha? Have you ever had a deep connection with an animal? How did it help you?

- Sasha and Aunt Ruthie have many special connections. What are some of the connections they share? Do you have a special connection with an older relative; an aunt or uncle, maybe a grandparent? What is something you connect about?
- One of Uncle Lou's favorite stories was "*Akiva and the Stone*." Sasha and Aunt Ruthie explore its meanings, and it becomes an important story for Sasha. Try to explain the story in your own words. What do you think it meant for Sasha? Does this story have any meaning for you? Do you have any special stories in your family that are important-or even sacred?
- Sasha and Aunt Ruthie, (and Uncle Lou) spend time at The Stone of Power. What is this place? What are some of the things they see there? Why is it special to them?
- Sasha, Ivy, Aunt Ruthie, Eli, Uncle Lou, all relate to the natural world in different ways. Ivy loves the deer and wants to protect them, Uncle Lou connected to the almost supernatural aspects of nature, Eli likes fishing, and Sasha rediscovers his "gift" for connecting with nature through riding horses. Are there other ways that connecting with nature plays a role in the story? Do you like being out in nature? What sort of things do you like to do? What does it mean to you to "connect" with nature?
- When things get really tough for Sasha, the people who love him decide that he needs a change, a fresh start. How does Sasha feel about this at first? How do things change? How do you think Sasha feels by the end of the story? Was the change helpful?
- Have you ever needed a change or made a fresh start? What was that like for you?
- Aunt Ruthie likes to make some traditional Jewish foods like kugel, matzoh balls, and other delicious things. Are there any foods from your culture that you love to eat? Are there any foods from other cultures or traditions that you have tried and enjoyed? What role does food play in your culture and others?
- Some of the important themes in *The Gray* are gaining **new perspectives**, learning to have **empathy**, and the **reconciliation** that comes from these themes. What do these **words** mean? One of the ways that reconciliation occurs in the story is between Sasha and his father—learning to understand each other's different perspectives and loving and respecting each other even more. What are some other examples of reconciliation that happen in the story?

Now that you have read and even discussed the book, design an alternative cover for *The Gray*.