



SOLE SURVIVOR

DISCUSSION GUIDE

ABOUT THE BOOK

This riveting true story from two *New York Times*–bestselling authors chronicles how a California sixth grader survived a deadly mountainside plane crash during a snowstorm.

Eleven-year-old Norman Ollestad is no stranger to extreme situations. Whether it's surfing big swells off Topanga Beach or skiing in a blizzard, he has braved one adrenaline-rush adventure after another, pushed by his thrill-seeking father to realize that “anything's possible.” And with Dad by his side, sometimes Norman believes him.

That motto is put to the ultimate test when the small plane Norman and his dad are aboard is engulfed by a snowstorm and crashes in the San Gabriel Mountains—with deadly consequences. Struggling in and out of lucidity, haunted by the voices and memories from difficult moments in his past, Norman must decide what to do while trapped eight thousand feet above sea level, facing dangers unlike any he has encountered before.

Inspired by the harrowing true childhood experience of author Norman Ollestad, this astonishing, action-packed story, co-written with Brendan Kiely, is about fear, survival, and the complicated forces—and people—that shape us. Fast-paced and unputdownable, *Sole Survivor* is the perfect read for fans of Dusti Bowling's *The Canyon's Edge*, Megan E. Freeman's *Alone*, and the *I Survived* series.



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

NORMAN OLLESTAD is the *New York Times*–bestselling author of *Crazy for the Storm*; *Gravity*; *French Girl with Mother*; and *Formentera*, an Audible Original short story. His work has appeared in *TIME*, *Outside*, and *Men's Journal*. He lives in Ojai, California with his family.



BRENDAN KIELY is the award-winning and *New York Times*–bestselling author of the novels *All American Boys* (with Jason Reynolds), *Tradition*, *The Last True Love Story*, and *The Gospel of Winter*, and the critically acclaimed nonfiction book, *The Other Talk: Reckoning with Our White Privilege*. He is the Distinguished Writer in Residence at Seton Hall University and he lives with his family in New York City.





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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-READING: QUESTIONS TO GET YOU READY

1. The preview of the book tells you that Norman “has braved one adrenaline-rush adventure after another” prior to the plane crash. How do you think extreme sports—ski racing, surfing, and skateboarding—might prepare young Norman for what lies ahead? What experiences have you had that might prepare you for unexpected future events?
2. Do you enjoy high-adrenaline activities? If so, what do you get out of them? If not, why not?

DURING READING: DETAILS TO NOTICE

1. “*Gotta play the hand we’re dealt*” (page 166). Keep a list of the lessons Norman learns—positive and negative—from his experiences and from the adults in his life. Which lessons will you carry with you after you finish the book?
2. The authors use imagery to help put the reader in the story, with descriptions like “the next gate coming fast, its icy rut snarling at me” (page 13). Collect bits of descriptive language that resonate with you. What do they add to the story?

POST-READING: WAYS TO REFLECT

1. The press clipping at the beginning of the book tells you that Norman survives a deadly plane crash. Reread pages 53–57 aloud. How do the authors build tension leading up to the crash? What part of this section is effective?
2. Dad’s nickname for Norman is “Boy Wonder.” Do you think Norman would have picked that nickname for himself prior to the plane crash? What about after? What nickname would you choose for yourself today? Why?
3. Norman vividly recalls skiing in a blizzard (page 67) and surfing a dangerous wave in Mexico (page 193). How do these memories help him on the mountain? Do you have memories you call upon when times are tough?
4. Norman describes two opposing emotions as he tries to survive: “one is towing me under, stripping me of energy, and the other is pushing me up through the surface” (page 105). These emotions are fear “like a heavy drape dragging me down” and anger “like a raging fire” (page 105). We often think of anger as destructive, but can it ever be productive?
5. Eleanor tells Norman, “There are good pretends and bad pretends. You get to choose” (page 116). How do you deal with “bad pretends”? Do they ever serve a useful purpose, or should you always focus on “good pretends”?
6. “I’m not sure how much more I can carry” (page 170). Throughout the book, Norman carries a heavy load—both physically and emotionally—on his young shoulders. What are some of his burdens? Have you ever felt like you are carrying a load that is too heavy for your shoulders?
7. “Everything in my life feels dark and out of control” (page 229). When Norman returns to his mother’s home after the crash, he descends into self-destructive behavior. Why do you think that happened? If you had been his friend, how could you have helped him?
8. Now that you have finished the book, what is your reaction to the photo on page 256?

Guide Author: Sara Hudson was an early-childhood educator for sixteen years and worked for five years for a literacy nonprofit, developing book-related materials for schools. She is now a bookseller and freelance writer.

