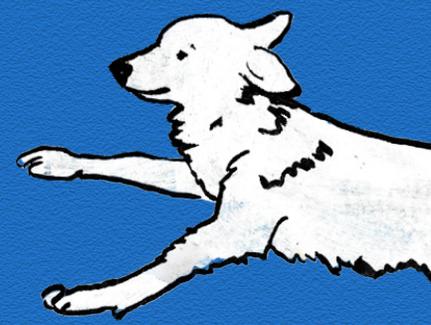


# Unlikely Animals



Annie

Hartnett

BOOK CLUB KIT





Dear Reader,

First of all, thank you from the bottom of my heart for reading *Unlikely Animals*! I wish I could come over to your house and dish about the behind-the-scenes creation of Emma and Clive, Ingrid, Auggie, and Harold, plus Moses and Rasputin, and the entire gang at Maple Street. There are so many anecdotes I want to share, but I'll try to limit myself; we don't have all night.

When I write, I take a few scraps from my real life, scramble them together, add a healthy dose of imagination, and try to make even the realistic feel a little magical. For example, when I was in college, two deer got into one of the dorms, ruined some furniture and broke some windows. My uncle's apartment neighbor did really shoot through his floorboard and into my uncle's reclining chair downstairs—luckily, my uncle had just gotten up to make himself a drink. Like Emma, I was a sixth-grade teacher when I was twenty-two, and during my early twenties, I lived at home with my parents, and struggled with feelings of not living up to my potential. When I was in graduate school, I lived for two years in a groundskeeper's house in a cemetery (rent was cheap, neighbors were quiet). I have also long been obsessed with a news story of an old woman who fed the bears near her house bowls of Ol' Roy dog food, until one day the bears killed her.

I hope you were able to read my author's note at the end of the book about how I stumbled upon the real-life history included in *Unlikely Animals*—the mansion, the hunting park, Austin Corbin, and, most importantly, my beloved Ernest Harold Baynes. There's so much more about our real-life Dr. Doolittle that I'd like to tell you. As a child at an English boarding school, he was often caught with a hedgehog in his pocket. As an adult, he became a naturalist, and was a talented public speaker. He was magnetic and handsome—I always call him Crocodile Dundee meets George Clooney. At first, songbirds were his chief conservation focus, and his book *Wild Bird Guests and How to Entertain Them* popularized bird baths and backyard birdfeeders. Later, he was instrumental in forming The American Bison Society, which was responsible for bringing back the American bison from the brink of extinction.

Imagine my delight when I was asking a local librarian if she knew anything about Baynes, when a man sitting at a nearby table piped up: "Baynes was quite the womanizer." I loved this gossip, as much as I also felt loyalty to Harold's wife, Louise, who loved animals as much as her husband did. She was his editor, and a talented photographer. Despite his philandering, I like to think they were a perfect match. According to his biography, written by his friend, during the last months of his illness his wife made all his meals for him, excusing their maid. During the end, he regularly asked his wife: "Is not this the strangest thing?" about his approaching death. That is a question I'm preoccupied with, as you might have guessed, the strangeness of death.

As you also might have guessed, this book was a wild journey to write, involving a lot of research and a lot of outlines. I wanted to write a story with a lot of moving parts and a large cast that would add up to something big at the end. Sometimes it was maddening to try to get all the pieces to fit together, other times it was great fun.

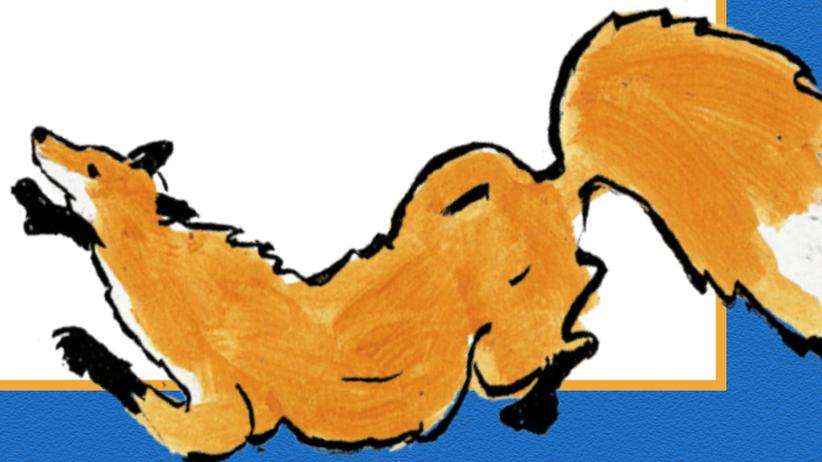
I hope you've had great fun reading it, and I hope your book club is a total bash.

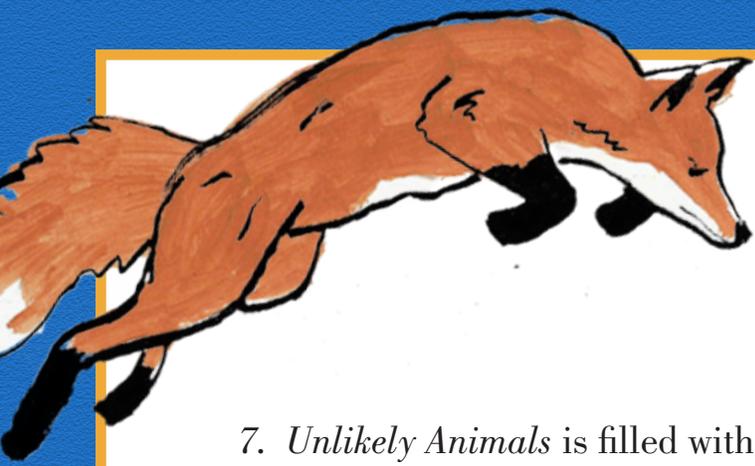
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# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the structure of *Unlikely Animals*. What did you think of the chorus of ghostly narrators? Or the photographs and transcripts inserted throughout the novel? What did these devices add to the overall effect?
2. This novel is full of quirky, memorable characters: Emma Starling, Clive Starling, Ernest Harold Baynes, multiple ghosts, etc. Which character was your favorite, and why?
3. In the beginning, the chorus of ghosts says the narrative is “Both funny and sad, the kind of story we like best.” Do you agree that funny and sad stories are the best ones? What emotions did you experience while reading the book?
4. Annie Hartnett didn’t set out to write a novel about the opioid crisis. During her research for the book, she realized it cast so large a shadow over the real town that inspired this fictional one that she would need to address it. What did you think about how *Unlikely Animals* portrays the opioid epidemic? Did reading this novel make you feel more compassionate towards people affected by it?
5. The story has a dash of magic to it, in the form of healing abilities, ghostly visions, and a graveyard Greek chorus. Why do you think Hartnett included these elements? Would you want magical shortcuts that could make life just a little bit easier?
6. Discuss the following quote: “Not knowing what happens next and the fear associated with the not-knowing, that uncertainty and anticipations is what makes us human.”





7. *Unlikely Animals* is filled with sharp, mordant humor. Which scenes or moments made you laugh? What does humor add to the overall effect of the story?
8. What did you think about Emma and Clive's relationship? Discuss the family dynamics at play. How do you think their relationships would be different if Clive wasn't sick?
9. "Anticipatory grief, it's called, when you're sad about something that hasn't happened yet. Oh man, we thought at Maple Street, how we missed the excruciating pain of being alive." Have you experienced anticipatory grief? What do you think the ghosts mean by "the excruciating pain of being alive"?
10. Discuss the role animals play in the book. Towards the novel's end, Hartnett writes, "That's why we like living with animals so much; they exhibit their joy so outwardly, remind us how to be better alive." Do you agree?
11. Discuss the role the fifth graders play in the book. How does the fifth-grade class bring the Starling family together? How does Emma earn her stripes as a teacher? Discuss the final scene: is Clive a hero for saving the children?
12. *Unlikely Animals* is about familiar expectations, imperfect friendships, and confronting our own mortality. What did you take away from reading this novel?
13. In her author's note at the back of the book, Hartnett talks about her research for *Unlikely Animals*. Were you surprised by the parts of this book inspired by real life? What did you think about Ernest Harold Baynes?

# THE RULES OF THE GRAVEYARD

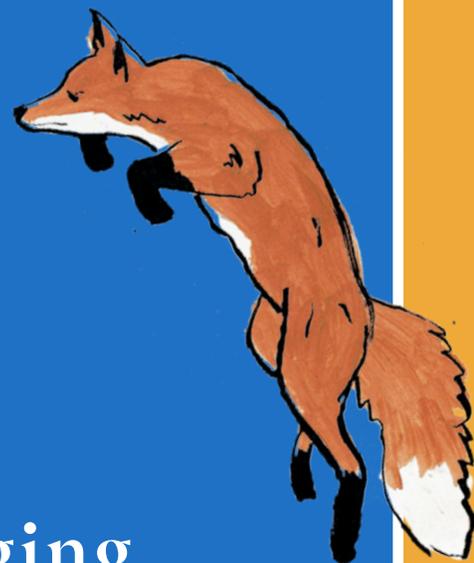
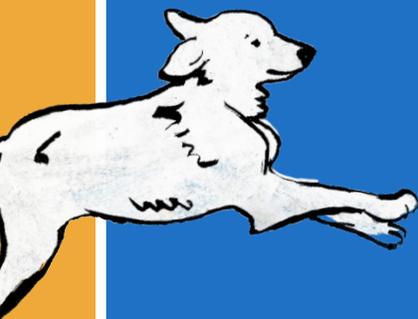
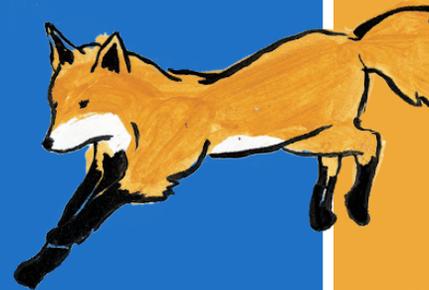
**No 1.**  
No Meddling

**No 2.**  
The Importance of Caring  
for the People of Everton

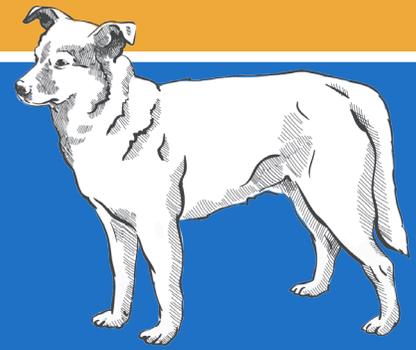
**No 3.**  
No Lawn Games

**No 4.**  
No Evil-Doing

**No 5.**  
No Unnecessary Singing



# THE UNLIKELY ANIMALS



## THE CATS

It was a source of entertainment at Maple Street Cemetery. Both funny and sad, the kind of story we like best.

## THE RABBITS

Clive didn't answer, because he was trying to stay calm, the kitchen filling up with rabbits again.

## THE FOX

Anticipatory grief, it's called, when you're sad about something that hasn't happened yet. Oh man, we thought at Maple Street, how we missed the excruciating pain of being alive.

## THE RATS

"To all my friends here tonight," he said, lifting the silver flask high. "Heaven will be so lonesome without you!"



## THE DOGS

"Your father has a new friend," her mother explained. "He's a friend to all creatures," her dad corrected.

## THE DEER

Now, most deer would have run from Clive Starling. He was wearing a bathrobe and an undershirt and what Clive's students would call tighty-whitey underwear.

## THE ROOSTER

"Was it a pillow fight?" Clive asked as they all headed toward the door of the rec center that opened to the parking lot. "What's with all the feathers? What did I miss?"



## THE BEARS

Instead, she wanted to know if this old woman or these bears had seen her father. "Hello!" Emma called out. The bears looked up, startled, and then turned away and galumphed off into the woods.





Maple Street Cemetery



The 100-acre estate in Newport, New Hampshire that inspired the mansion in the novel

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## Meet the real Ernest Harold Baynes

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