

# ELLIE ENGLE

## SAVES ~~THE WORLD~~

### *Herself!*



BY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

## LEAH JOHNSON



# ELLIE ENGLE SAVES THE WORLD *Herself!*



**“This book is for the hero inside all of us. Readers will feel seen, loved, and cherished after spending time with Ellie Engle.”**

**—Erin Entrada Kelly,  
Newbery Medal winner for *Hello, Universe***

From award-winning author Leah Johnson comes a laugh-until-you-cry, cry-until-you-laugh story about friendship, change, and the power we have to love ourselves.



Ellie Engle doesn't stand out. Not at home, where she's alone with her pet fish since her dad moved away and her mom has to work around the clock. Not at the bakery, where she helps out old Mr. Walker on the weekends. And definitely not at school, where her best friend, Abby—the coolest, boldest, most talented girl in the world—drags Ellie along on her never-ending quest to “make her mark.” To someone else, a life in the shadows might seem boring, or lonely. But not to Ellie. As long as she has Abby by her side and a comic book in her hand, she's quite content.

Too bad life didn't bother checking in with Ellie. Because when a freak earthquake hits her small town, Ellie wakes up with the power to bring anything back to life with just her touch. And when a video of her using her powers suddenly goes viral, Ellie's life goes somewhere she never imagined—or wanted: straight into the spotlight.

Surviving middle school is hard enough. Surviving middle school when paparazzi are camped out on your front lawn and an international pop singer wants you to use your powers on live TV and you might be in love with your best friend but she doesn't know it? Absolutely impossible.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**LEAH JOHNSON** was born and raised in central Indiana—a tried-and-true, lifelong Hoosier (and as you can perhaps imagine, much of her work now features more cornfields and soybeans than any one human has business writing about). She began her writing career with a spiral notebook full of short stories in Mrs. Peacock’s fifth-grade class and could never quite bring herself to stop. That love of storytelling eventually carried her to Sarah Lawrence College for her MFA in fiction writing, and to Brooklyn to live amongst every other struggling writer.



Photo Credit: Leah Trib Productions

Leah’s bestselling debut YA novel, *You Should See Me in a Crown*, was the inaugural Reese’s Book Club YA pick, a Stonewall Honor Book, a Junior Library Guild selection, an ALA Rainbow List Top Ten selection, and was named one of *Cosmopolitan*’s 15 Best Young Adult Books of 2020. *Kirkus* called *Crown* “[A] pitch-perfect rom-com . . . The queer prom romance you didn’t know you needed,” and her mom called it “A real book!” It was featured on a number of Best of the Year lists including *Cosmopolitan*, Amazon, *Kirkus*, *Marie Claire*, *Publishers Weekly*, and the New York Public Library. Learn more about the author at <https://www.byleahjohnson.com/books>.



## About the Book

Ellie Engle wants to stay in the shadows of the people around her, like her best friend, Abby. Abby wants to “make her mark” in middle school, but Ellie likes the idea of low-key activities like reading comic books and helping at the local bakery. After an unexpected earthquake, Ellie wakes up with superpowers that she’s not sure how to control. Her powers allow her to inexplicably bring plants and animals back to life. Amid figuring out her new powers, she accidentally uses them in school . . . and the video goes viral. Ellie is thrown into a very bright spotlight without a choice. The journey is nonstop as Ellie grapples with her own identity, family dynamics, friendships, and the stress of starting middle school.

## Common Core Alignment

The novel *Ellie Engle Saves Herself* provides an opportunity to apply complex literacy skills such as inferencing, deconstructing vocabulary, author’s purpose, and textual connections. This discussion guide provides suggestions aligned with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for Reading: Literature, Writing, and Speaking and Listening. Each activity in this guide includes a reference for the CCSS strand, domain, and standard that is addressed. To support instruction or obtain additional information visit the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Website [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org).

- *Instructional note: During each of the activities, please encourage students to support their claims with evidence from the text and illustrations. Providing young learners with the opportunity to answer text dependent questions is critical to success with Common Core State Standards (CCSS).*

## Activating Background Knowledge

### Explore Important Connections Before Reading

1. What is the purpose of an “origin story” in a comic book or superhero series? Can you name a few familiar origin stories? What are common elements in a memorable origin story? Why is an origin story important to start a superhero series?
2. The novel begins with the following quote: “A hero isn’t the one who always wins. It’s the one who always tries. —Miles Morales.” Why do you think the author selected this quote? Based upon the synopsis, how might this quote relate to the story? Be specific.
3. In your opinion, what are the best and most challenging aspects of middle and high school? Based upon your experience, is social media positive for teenagers? Why or why not? Be sure to support your opinion with examples.

# Discussion Questions

Explore the questions individually and in small groups while reading.



1. Instead of a traditional chapter title the author uses **bold font** for part of the first sentence. Why do think the author chose this style? How might the text feature engage readers? Do you like this format style? Why or why not?
2. In Chapter 1, Ellie states, “It used to bother me, people noticing Abby and not me, but not anymore. I like how calm it is in her shadow. There’s no pressure to be and do anything except what I want to be and do” (*page 4*). Why might Ellie feel comfortable in the shadow? What does this suggest about Ellie’s character? Have you had moments that you did not like or want a spotlight? Provide examples.
3. In Chapter 2, readers learn more about Ellie’s family and her neighbors the Ortegas. Using textual details describe Ellie’s family and the Ortega family. Who is in each family? How are the families different and similar? Who is mentioned from Ellie’s family but not present? Be specific.
4. After the earthquake, Ellie says, “My heart is rattling like a train about to run off the tracks. My entire body feels like it’s full of the fizzy lifting drink from *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. Even the hairs on my arms are standing up” (*page 19*). Does this seem like a normal response to an earthquake? Why or why not? As the book continues, explain how Ellie is impacted by the earthquake.
5. In Chapter 4, Ellie states, “When I was in kindergarten, I would cry so hard every time he dropped me off, I would slip into a panic attack before school breakfast” (*page 29*). How does Ellie cope when she has a panic attack? What emotions does Ellie try to mask from her mom (*page 30*)? Do you think she should share more with her mom? Why or why not? Provide textual details.
6. In Chapter 5, Ellie faces the loss of Burt the Betta Fish. What prior losses has Ellie experienced in her life? How might each loss impact Ellie? In response to Burt the Betta Fish, what prayer does Ellie say? What memories does she think about while saying goodbye to Burt the Betta Fish? How can prayers and/or memories be comforting during a loss?



- 7.** Think about superhero origin stories that you’ve read or seen. Do you agree that “plenty of their origin stories begin with a slow slide into insanity” (*page 35*). Provide examples to support your response. What is Ellie’s origin story? Based upon her powers, do you think she is on the road to superhero or villain status? Why?
- 8.** In Chapter 7, Abby says, “No one can find out about this. If you become, like, some kind of circus act or something we’ll never live it down. No one will talk to us! And then we’ll never make our marks” (*page 54*). Based upon the quote, what does it mean to “make your mark”? What happens in Chapter 8 that causes Ellie’s perception to change about her powers? How do Ellie’s and Abby’s perceptions differ regarding popularity and the recent superpowers? Provide textual evidence.
- 9.** In Chapter 9, Ellie shares a memory of Poppy when he talked about inequity and intolerance in our world. Ellie says, “Why would someone get mad just because people dressed different than they did and prayed in another language?” (*page 72*). Can you think of examples of inequity and intolerance you’ve seen? In your opinion, how should we address this issue as a society?
- 10.** What kind of bullying does Ellie experience in middle school? For example, think about the classroom interaction in Chapter 7. What is the significance of a “Davis kid”? Later, in Chapter 16, Ellie says, “Marley is talking into her phone now, not-so-subtly pointing it in our direction, and giggling. I’m not surprised. Marley is the type of person who gets joy out of making anyone who is different than her feel uncomfortable” (*page 145*). Do you think that Ellie is being bullied in this instance? Why or why not? What are positive and negative characteristics of the classmates mentioned in the book? Be specific.
- 11.** How do Mr. Walker and Ms. Winston support Ellie throughout the novel? In Chapter 11, what advice does Mr. Walker give Ellie? In Chapter 12, Ellie says, “If you don’t have to learn anything new, you don’t make as many mistakes” (*page 103*). How does Ms. Winston help her push past this mindset in different parts of the book? Provide examples. Who in your life gives you the best advice and support?
- 12.** In Chapter 13, how does Abby and Ellie’s relationship change? Abby says, “We don’t have to do everything together, right? Like, maybe, the gym should be off-limits on practice days for you” (*page 113*). Why would Abby want to make this change? As you read, discuss how Abby and Ellie’s relationship evolves. In Chapter 19, why does Abby say, “You don’t even care about making your mark, and I do. . . . It’s not fair” (*page 169*)?

- 13.** In Chapter 16, how are Ellie’s powers revealed? What is the reaction from classmates and family? How does the media highlight at the end of Chapter 18 enhance reader understanding of the events? Do you like that the author included the media examples? Why or why not?
- 14.** Willa Moon is mentioned many times in the text. What actual, or real-life, celebrity does Willa Moon remind you of? In Chapter 21, Willa Moon makes an offer to Ellie, what is the offer? Do you think Ellie should take the offer? Why or why not? After Ellie makes her decision, what happens? Describe the sequence of events and impact.
- 15.** Ellie says, “What I didn’t understand before, though, was that Abby isn’t all good, either. Just like some of my favorite comic books, she’s got some pages ripped at the edges and folded down at the corners. But just because she isn’t perfect doesn’t mean I can’t love her. And just because she’s made mistakes doesn’t mean I can’t forgive her” (*page 247*). Based upon this quote and the events, do you think the friendship can be repaired? Why or why not? Provide textual examples.

## Post-Reading

### *Comparing Novels*

- 1.** Did you like the ending of the first novel? Why or why not? If you could rewrite the ending, what events would you change? What aspects of the ending would you keep the same? Think about the sequel; if you could create a synopsis for the next novel, what would it say? Be specific.
- 2.** The theme is the message or lesson that the author wants readers to explore in the novel. What is the main theme from the story? Why is this theme important for readers to understand and discuss? Is the theme further emphasized in the Author’s Note? Why did Leah Johnson write this novel? Provide textual evidence in your response.
- 3.** If you could cast the movie for this book, who would you select for each role? Why? After casting, which scene would you be most excited to film? What soundtrack would you choose for the opening scene? Explain.

### *Standards Aligned to Discussion Questions*

*Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details: RL. 6.1, 6.2, 6.3*

*Reading Literature: Craft and Structure: RL. 6.4, 6.5, 6.6*

*Reading Literature: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: RL.6.9*

# Post-Reading Activities

## *Creative Projects and Writing Extensions*

- 1. Book Banning Discussion:** There is often discussion about books and curriculum that should not be allowed in schools. Engage in a discussion about book banning with a small group. Each participant should share their perspective and ideas by engaging in active listening (e.g., making eye contact, taking turns, posing questions, and providing comments that build upon ideas). At the end of the conversation, each group should paraphrase key ideas that were discussed.

**DISCUSSION PROMPT:** When a book is banned, it is removed from a school's library circulation and curriculum. Before being banned, a book is typically challenged by an individual or group based on the perspective that it contains inappropriate information or language. Can you think of controversial topics that are often challenged? Should people be able to ban books from schools or libraries? Why or why not? Who should make the final decision? Why might authors write about topics that are considered controversial? (*Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration: SL. 6.1*)

- 2. Planting and Harvest Cycle:** In the text, Ellie feels excited about starting a garden after working with Ms. Winston. Using electronic and/or print resources, study the planting and harvest cycle for spring, summer, or fall crops. Then write a brief paragraph about the planting cycle for one specific season. For example, if you want a summer garden, when and what should you plant? Lastly, draw a garden for your selected season using paint, markers, or other art tools. In a gallery walk, share your art and the resources you explored to support your design. (*Speaking and Listening: Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas: SL. 6.5*)





- 3. Misinformation or Accurate News?:** Toward the end of the novel, Ellie learns that social media can quickly spread misinformation. Conduct research by exploring several online and/or print resources related to “social media” and “news platforms” as sources of information. What is the difference between news sharing via social media and news platforms (e.g., newspapers, television)? Based upon your research, is social media a positive way to share news? Why or why not? Are news platforms more reliable than social media networks? Why or why not? In what ways can news platforms be flawed? How can we be “smart” consumers of the news? Create a report aligned to credible sources that includes the following: (1) an introduction, (2) a summary of findings, and (3) a bibliography.
- 4. Design a Comic Book:** Think about Ellie’s next adventure and design a comic book using paper or electronic tools. The comic book should have a clear beginning, middle, and ending; a problem; a solution; and characters who change their perspectives throughout the adventure. As part of the design, include illustrations that align with the text to show word-image connections. Ideas can be conveyed through word containers, speech bubbles, and images to show the progression of the adventure.



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