

This month, 6th, 7th, and 8th grade girls and their grown-ups will read *Chains* by Laurie Halse Anderson. This book spans several crucial months in our nation's history, and tells a story of freedom through the eyes of one clever, determined girl, Isabel.

Isabel can't control that she was sold to the Locktons of New York instead of being freed as she was promised. She can't control the cruel treatment her new owners give her sister and her. She can't even control her name.

Yet, Isabel finds small and large actions to protect herself and her sister, to help others, and to hold onto her sense of herself. Throughout this historical fiction novel, Isabel passes information to the American rebels in an effort to get freedom for herself and her sister. When that doesn't work, she tries other intrepid schemes to get herself and her sister away from the dangers of the Locktons and Revolutionary War-era New York City.

Isabel's story can inspire us to remember that no one else controls who we are and what we do in each moment, unless we let them. We can take control of our own lives, as Isabel does, and live in accordance with our hearts and souls.

On the following pages, you will find some suggestions for how your book club meeting might go. Feel free to use whichever of these questions and tips works for you, and substitute as you wish. The best book discussions develop organically as people listen closely and respond to each other.

### **Munch 'n' Chat, 20-30 minutes**

As grown-ups and girls arrive, spend some time catching up. The host family might put out snacks and drinks. As a side note, it's nice to include girls in the decisions about what to serve and how to set up for the club meeting. Older girls might even have a sense of pride from being totally in charge of setting up and running the meetings.

### **Ice-Breaker, 10-15 minutes**

This month, you could try a silly ice-breaker, especially if you live in a place that is actually icy. Nothing warms a person up like a good belly laugh! Come up with your own questions, or try some of the following: **Which is better: peanut butter or chocolate? Which is more fun: pools or trampolines? What's the best way to eat an Oreo?**

Give a few minutes for pairs to discuss. If you'd like, give 5-10 minutes for pairs to share a bit about each other's answers.

## **Book Discussion, 30 minutes or so**

These questions about *Chains* might help you begin your book talk. Some groups might discuss all of these questions, but many groups will use only one or two questions to get their conversation going. Feel free to write your own discussion questions.

- What are some of the things that Isabel does in the beginning of the story to show that she is trying to control small parts of her life?
- What do we learn about Isabel? What is important to her? What does she want?
- Isabel's choices - sneaking out to pass messages, for example - could have dire consequences if she's found out. Why does she do these things anyway?
- Madam Lockton does all she can to intimidate and control Isabel, even going so far as to send her sister Ruth away. How does Isabel deal with this violation?
- Many of the other characters in the story claim they can't help Isabel and Ruth because of the law. What do you think about this?
- Why does Isabel risk punishment to bring food to Curzon and the other prisoners?
- What does Isabel mean when she realizes that Madam Lockton doesn't "own her soul?" (pg. 246)

## **Leadership Goals, 15 minutes**

Throughout her story, Isabel takes matters into her own hands, refusing to settle for her situation even though the laws about slavery are against her. She

makes bold decisions and risks terrible punishment to protect her sister, help others, and find freedom.

Thinking for yourself and making decisions are important leadership qualities. They sounds simple enough, but they are hard to do. Let's say there's something you want - to get better grades, to join a sports team, to be a good friend. How will you do those things, despite the challenges and risks involved?

Book club members could share when they've been in situations like this before - wanting something very difficult or risky - and what they did or wish they did. People could also share a leadership goal related to making decisions and taking control of their lives.

For example, some goals could be, "I'm going to ask my teacher to help me with the concepts that I don't understand," "I'm going to enter a writing competition even if I might not do well," or, "I'm going to tell my friend when I don't agree with her even if I'm worried she might get mad at me."

This could also be a good opportunity to use role play. If you'd like to try, follow these steps:

1. Pick one scenario. It's easier if it's based on someone's real experience, so that person can act as "director."
2. Ask the group to brainstorm some different actions the person could take in that scenario.
3. The person who had the experience plays herself and chooses on of the possible actions. A volunteer offers to play the other person in the scenario.
4. You can repeat this with other actions, discussing which actions felt most natural and had the best outcome.

Role play is a great way to practice difficult conversations in a safe setting.

## **Closing, 5 minutes**

Before everyone goes off their separate ways, make sure you've chosen a date for your March meeting. Happy reading!

## Further Reading

If you really loved this book, and you'd like to read more books like it, here are some suggestions. If there are other books you would like to recommend, we'd love to hear them! Please share them on our Girls Leadership Book Club Facebook Group so our community can keep growing our list of great titles.

*Forge and Ashes* by Laurie Halse Anderson - Isabel and Curzon's stories continue in the second and third books of the Seeds of America trilogy, as they run from those who would arrest them for escaping slavery and desperately try to find Isabel's sister Ruth.

*Sophia's War: A Tale of the Revolution* by Avi - When she sees the hanging of Nathan Hale, young Sophia begins her transformation into a Patriot and, ultimately, a spy for the Americans. Posing as a maid in the home of a top-ranking British officer, Sophia endures grave danger in order to stop a plot against the Americans.

*Hattie Big Sky* by Kirby Larson - This World War I-era novel tells the story of sixteen-year-old Hattie, who moves to Montana to build a home for herself on her late uncle's homesteading plot. Determined to succeed, she stubbornly endures a series of natural disasters, and feels political pressure to shun the only friends she has, a family of Germans in a nearby homestead. This book shows a rarely-told time in history from a personal and intriguing perspective.