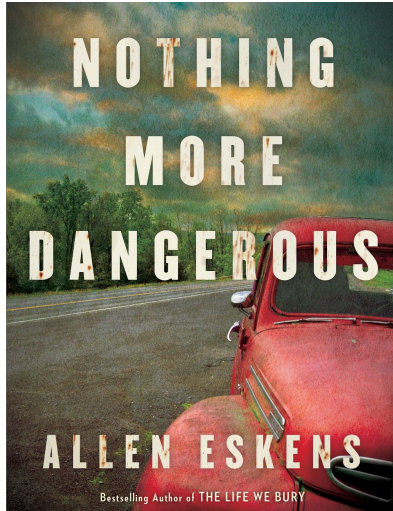


## Teachers' Guide

# Nothing More Dangerous

A novel by Allen Eskens



### Praise for *Nothing More Dangerous*

“Powerful, unforgettable... A coming-of-age book to rival some of the best, such as William Kent Krueger’s *Ordinary Grace* or Larry Watson’s *Montana 1948*.”

-- [Library Journal \(starred review\)](#)

**A Library Journal “Best of 2019”**

“*Nothing More Dangerous* is the next best thing to Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. A magnificent book and an uplifting one, suitable for both adults and YA.”

--[New York Journal of Books](#)

“Eskens is such a great writer that he handles all of this effortlessly and raises what is listed as a mere ‘mystery’ to the class of literary fiction. For me, that makes *Nothing More Dangerous* required reading and something that

should be taught at high-school level the same as Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*.”

--[Criminal Element Review](#)

“A Stunning small-town mystery. Eskens clearly has an affinity for clever boys like Boady and Thomas; but he also has lovely visions of the mighty trees and secret swimming holes that make them long for summer — and mysteries to solve.”

--[New York Times Book Review](#)

“Gripping.... A “Stand By Me” quality with Stephen King-like dread around every bend.”

--[Minneapolis Star Tribune](#)

“Allen Eskens doesn’t just tap into the experience of growing up in a rural Southern town; *Nothing More Dangerous* dissects the inner life of a teen forced to confront prejudice and persecution.”

--[Shelf Awareness](#)

“To compare any book to Harper Lee’s classic is perhaps setting expectations too high, but [the narrator’s] skill, combined with Eskens’s story, makes the comparison appropriate.”

--[AudioFile](#)

## **DESIGN AND PURPOSE**

The purpose of this guide is to assist teachers in using *Nothing More Dangerous* in their classrooms as a teaching tool. The guide is divided into two parts.

- 1) The first part contains targeted questions designed to direct classroom discussion as the book is being read. These discussions will focus on both the writing elements of the novel as well as the social and historical environment that makes up the story world. This part of the guide will help students follow and grasp the book's major themes and plot points.
  
- 2) The second part of the guide is a set of recommended assignments designed to get students to delve deeper into the novel's plot points and themes. The assignments correspond to specific teachable moments from the novel that have relevance in today's society. The assignments are designed to provide depth to the students' understanding of those issues.

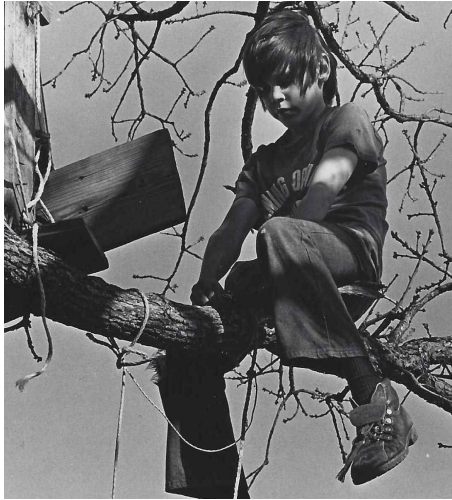
This guide adheres to the Common Core State Standards Initiative. After each question below, the relevant Common Core Standards are listed—and all of the questions appearing in this guide correspond to the English Language Arts Standards (Grade 9–10, 11–12) for History/Social Studies, Reading: Informational Text, Writing, and/or Speaking & Listening.

*Nothing More Dangerous* has a reading level of ages fourteen and up. Upon previewing the book, educators will know best which individuals and groups of students will respond most meaningfully to the content of this novel in settings such as reading workshop and literature circles.

This teacher's guide was written by Allen Eskens, author of *Nothing More Dangerous*, with guidance and assistance provided by Ms. Oona Abrams. (Thank you Oona).

### **BOOK SYNOPSIS - *Nothing More Dangerous***

In a small southern town where loyalty to family and to "your people" carries the weight of a sacred oath, defying those unspoken rules can be a deadly proposition.



After fifteen years of growing up in the Ozark hills with his widowed mother, high-school freshman Boady Sanden is beyond ready to move on. He dreams of glass towers and cityscapes, driven by his desire to be anywhere other than Jessup, Missouri. The new kid at St. Ignatius High School, if he isn't being pushed around, he is being completely ignored. Even his beloved woods, his playground as a child and his sanctuary as he grew older, seem to be closing in on him, suffocating him.

Then Thomas Elgin moves in across the road, and Boady's life begins to twist and turn. Coming to know the Elgins -- a black family settling into a community where notions of "us" and "them" carry the weight of history -- forces Boady to rethink his understanding of the world he's taken for granted. Secrets hidden in plain sight begin to unfold: the mother who wraps herself in the loss of her husband, the neighbor who carries the wounds of a mysterious past that he holds close, the quiet boss who is fighting his own hidden battle.

*Nothing More Dangerous* is a literary mystery and a coming of age story. It is a story of redemption, of loss, of friendship, and forgiveness. But woven throughout *Nothing More Dangerous* is the story of a boy struggling to understand his subconscious racism, that subtle but powerful impulse to divide people into us and them. In the end, I wanted to create a work that would not only entertain, but evoke contemplation, start a conversation about the latent hold that subconscious prejudices can have on otherwise good-hearted people.

**TEACHERS' GUIDE****Creating the story world: chapters 1 - 4**

**A story is a journey taken by the protagonist in a novel and sometimes by other characters as well. For that journey to begin, the reader must be given the starting point—the story world in which the characters exist. In *Nothing More Dangerous*, the first four chapters set up different aspects of that story world.**

**Chapter 1:**

**In chapter one, how does the author relay the setting of *Nothing More Dangerous* (the fictional town of Jessup Missouri in 1976) to the reader?**

**Chapter one also introduces the two important forces that permeate the novel: 1) Boady's loneliness and sense of isolation and 2) societal pressures, in particular racism. How are those forces set up as obstacles for Boady to face? Boady is reluctant to stop the pudding attack on Diana Jackson, but does so, putting himself in peril. What does that say about who he is at his core? How does the reader see Boady at the end of Chapter one?**

(CCRA.R.3)

**Chapter 2:**

**Chapter two introduces the reader to Boady's home life on Frog Hollow Road. Characters in a novel are often motivated by what they desire or by what they fear. As he walks down the road, Boady informs the reader of his two great desires: his desire to run away and his desire to not hurt his mother. How are those desires in opposition to one another? How does Boady try to rationalize his choice in that dilemma? Does that rationalization hold water?**

**Chapter two also hints at the coming change in Boady's world. The protagonist's journey usually begins with what is called the inciting incident—the thing that injects a change into the protagonist's world and sends them on their journey. Here, the Dixon house, which has sat empty for years, has been sold. How does that suggest a change for Boady's world?**

(CCRA.R.2)

**Chapter 3:**

**Chapter three brings the mystery of the missing Lida Poe to Boady's home on Frog Hollow. It also starts a subplot—the mystery behind Hoke Gardner's past. What does the reader know about Hoke at this point? Has the author created any questions in the reader's mind about Hoke? If so, what are those questions? Does Hoke seem to be a good guy or bad guy at this point?**

(CCRA.R.5)

**Chapter 4:**

**The story world has three primary settings. The first is St. Ignatius High School. The second is the area that encompasses Boady's house, Hoke's house and the Dixon house. Chapter four introduces the third primary setting, which is Schenicker's Drywall Company at the end of Frog Hollow Road. How does the reader view Milo Halcomb and his son Angus? How does having members of the Halcomb clan, not only at St. Ignatius but also working on Frog Hollow Road, offer an opportunity for further conflict?**

(CCRA.R.5)

**Chapter 5:**

**Chapter five introduces the starting point of the novel's most important subplot—Boady's journey to understand his own subconscious prejudices. What are Boady's beliefs regarding race as they are presented in Chapter five? Boady gives a few examples of overt racism (conscious racism) as he defends his belief that he is not prejudiced. What are the differences between those intentional forms of racism from the Jim Crow era and Boady's opinions regarding race? Why might Boady believe that he is not prejudiced?**

(CCRA.R.6)

**Chapter 6:**

**Rather than beat Boady up for tripping Bob in chapter one, Jarvis offers Boady the opportunity to be one of them. Why might this offer of friendship be attractive to a kid like Boady? How can the power of belonging to a group lead a person to change who they are?**

(CCRA.R.3)

**Chapter 7:**

**In chapter seven, the Elgins move into the neighborhood. What does the reader learn about Boady through his fascination with the Elgin's possessions? Hoke talks to Boady about the white supremacist group called the CORPS, as they watch the new black neighbor move in. How does this set up alternative paths that Boady might choose in the future?**

(CCRA.R.3)

**Chapter 8:**

**In chapter eight, Boady meets his new neighbor, Thomas Elgin, by running into him in a tree. Earlier, in Chapter two, Boady presented the reader with competing desires: running away from home on the one hand, and staying in Jessup so that he doesn't hurt his mother on the other. These are his conscious desires, but Boady has an underlying, subconscious desire**

that he doesn't fully understand—the desire to have a home (community) that he doesn't *want* to run away from. What is it about his community/school that is lacking? What is lacking from his life on Frog Hollow Road? How does meeting Thomas open the door to that subconscious desire getting met? How might Boady's prejudices get in the way of that desire being met?

(CCRA.R.2)

### Chapter 9:

Boady tells Hoke about his first meeting with Thomas and how, in Boady's mind, it was all Thomas's fault that it didn't go well. Hoke responds by telling Boady that sometimes when you look down at the surface of a pond, all you can see is your own reflection and not the depth of what is on the other side. What is Hoke trying to convey with that metaphor? How is empathy the key to undoing a person's prejudices?

(CCRA.R.5)

### Chapter 10 - 11:

Boady and Thomas meet again, but with a different result. What might account for that different result? Act one of a novel is the status quo or the setting of the story world. Act one ends when an inciting incident occurs to set



**the protagonist on a journey. How do you think that Boady's meeting Thomas will act as a catalyst for Boady's journey?**

(CCRA.R.3)

### **Chapter 12:**

**There are more journeys than just that of Boady Sanden in this novel. Other characters will have journeys of their own, which will play out in subplots. Chapter 12 introduces one of those subplots when Thomas's mom, Jenna, orchestrates an introduction to Boady's mom Emma. How do you see Emma at this point in the novel (what is her status quo)? What do you anticipate her journey will be as the novel plays out?**

(CCRA.R.5)

### **Chapter 13 – 14**

**Often, when an oppressive force (bully) rises to power, he does so with the aid of those around him. Some people will remain silent in the face of a bully's cruelty. Some will adopt a herd mentality and follow him so that they can be part of the *accepted* group. As Jarvis Halcomb ratchets up the pressure for Boady to do the bidding of the CORPS, the Boob Brothers are at his side. How do they represent those two aspects of society?**

**Joining Jarvis and the CORPS would fulfill Boady's desire to belong—to have friends. Why does he choose not to join them? What does that say about who Boady is and what he wants deep down?**

(CCRA.R.3)

## **Chapter 15**

**In chapter fifteen, Boady relates some small examples of how he'd been bullied, and that he often feels invisible among the other students. Yet he sat next to Diana Jackson all semester and hasn't talked to her. How can such acts, intentional or unintentional, affect others? Why do you think that Diana helped him cheat on the test?**

(CCRA.R.6)

## **Chapter 16 – 18**

**How is Boady's world changing as a result of having the Elgins in his life? How is Boady changing through his friendship with Thomas?**

(CCRA.R.3)

**Chapter 19 – 22**

**The divide between Boady’s two paths (joining the Halcombs and the CORPS versus befriending Thomas and the Elgins) increases in these chapters. How do these chapters show the increasing divergence in those paths? On page 138, Boady apologizes after he and Thomas run from the Quaker church, although he isn’t sure why he is making that apology. Why do you think he felt the need to apologize?**

(CCRA.R.6)

**Chapter 23 – 24**

**Now that Boady has chosen his path, he faces consequences for that decision. How does the author ramp up the conflict resulting from Boady’s decision? In chapter 24, Wally Schenicker takes a stand to protect Boady, but pays a price for it. Looking back, what clues did the author layout that Wally Schenicker might be gay?**

(CCRA.R.2)

**Chapter 25**

**Chapter twenty-five gives the reader the most important lesson of the novel. Hoke tells Boady the story of Emmett Till to point out how racist tendencies can grow and lead to extreme violence. In chapter 5, Boady was**

sincere in his belief that he was not prejudiced because he didn't think that people should be forced to use different bathrooms simply due to their skin color, yet he had no qualms believing that some people might be inferior because of something as artificial as skin color.

In this chapter, Hoke points out that there is an instinct to divide people into us and them, which has been passed down from our ancestors. It is not whether we have the impulse to be prejudicial—we do. The important thing to know is that it exists in each of us and we must be diligent and fight against that instinct.

How does that instinct express itself in today's society? How does it divide people along lines of: race, religion, sex, country of origin, etc.? How does that instinct influence peer groups (sports vs. band vs. chess club etc.)? How does the impulse to divide people into us and them lead to stereotyping among these groups?

The author has Hoke recite a quote from Martin Luther King Jr. that “Nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance.” Discuss the meaning of the Martin Luther King Jr. quote. Why did the author use that quote to find the title for the book. How does that title express the major theme of the novel?

(CCRA.R.9)

**Chapter 26 – 27:**

**On their trip to the University of Missouri in Columbia, Thomas and Boady delve into Hoke Gardner’s mysterious background. This draws the reader into Hoke’s subplot. Hoke’s journey doesn’t start (as Boady’s does) at the beginning of the novel. Where does Hoke’s journey begin? What does the reader know about that journey by the time the boys leave Columbia?**

**On the drive back to Jessup, Mr. Elgin is pulled over by a sheriff’s deputy. Compare the way Boady reacts to that incident versus how Charles and Thomas react. What explains the difference in reaction?**

(CCRA.R.6)

**Chapter 28 – 32:**

**How has Boady changed from the beginning of the novel up to the dance at the parish picnic? What explains those changes? Do you think that Boady would have danced with Diana Jackson had he never met Thomas?**

**In chapter 32, as he is being assaulted by Jarvis, Boady considers the insults that Jarvis makes. How does his response to Jarvis mark the completion of his journey to understand subconscious prejudices?**

(CCRA.R.3)

**Chapter 33 – 34**

**Throughout the novel, Boady has taken incremental steps along his journey to understand his prejudices. Those steps have led him to be squarely opposed to Jarvis and those forces that rely upon ignorance and bigotry to build themselves up. This culminates in a multipronged attack on the residents of Frog Hollow Road after the parish picnic. Track how the author increased the level of conflict over the course of the novel to match Boady's incremental steps.**

(CCRA.R.2)

**Chapter 35 – 37**

**With such a large part of Boady's journey concluded, the author turns the reader's attention to Hoke's journey. How does the author give the reader Hoke's backstory? What does Boady mean when he says that it was as if he had been looking in a mirror all of his life and it suddenly turned into a window? Now that you know that backstory, do Hoke's actions over the course of the novel come across differently? How has Hoke acted as a surrogate father to Boady? Why did Hoke take on that role?**

(CCRA.R.5)

## Chapter 38

**Boady says that running away from Jessup had been the great preoccupation of his life, but now he cannot remember the last time that notion stirred in him. Earlier, in chapter two, Boady stated that his two greatest desires were to leave Jessup on the one hand, and not hurt his mother on the other. Those were his conscious desires (desires of which he was aware). But all along, there had been a subconscious desire—one that, once met, would make moot those conscious desires. How do the changes in Boady’s life--brought about by the arrival of the Elgins to Frog Hollow--fulfill those subconscious desires?**

(CCRA.R.6)

## Chapter 39 – 40

**Continuing on the track of Boady’s subconscious desires, these chapters represent the calm before the storm, a moment in time when it appears that everything is going to be okay. At the end of chapter 40, Boady states that if a guy could “hold a moment inside of him forever, unchanged, that would have been the kind of memory to hold onto.” What is it about that moment that makes Boady want to cherish it? If Boady’s subconscious desire was to have a home that he didn’t want to run away from, how has life on Frog Hollow changed to meet that desire? How does the last sentence of the chapter shift**

**the perspective of the narrator slightly? How does it foreshadow bad things to come?**

**(CCRA.R.6)**

### **Chapter 41 - 45**

**These chapters offer the climax of the novel for the external plot (the mystery of what happened to Lida Poe). Discuss the differences between the external plotline of the novel and the internal plot (Boady coming to understand himself and the world around him). Which is more important to this novel?**

**Cecil Halcomb had been talked about throughout the novel but doesn't make an appearance until chapter 44. There is no single antagonist in this novel but rather an antagonistic force. What is that antagonistic force and how does the author use the Halcomb clan (Cecil, Milo, Jarvis and Angus) to represent different aspects of that force? How would each see themselves if they were the hero of their own story?**

**(CCRA.R.2, CCRA.R. 3)**

### **Chapter 46 – end**

**The last chapters are the denouement, that part of the novel where the author wraps up various storylines and presents the reader with the changed**



world of the protagonist. After the climactic battle in chapters 44 and 45, of the four characters who represented the antagonistic force, Milo and Jarvis are dead, Angus is alive, and Cecil was never found. Why do you think the author allowed Angus Halcomb to live? What symbolism can be drawn from the fact that Cecil Halcomb was never found?

In chapter 49, the author has Boady come to the conclusion that he wants to give college a try, even though he doubts himself on this score. How has Boady evolved on the notion of his being able to go to college and how did Thomas play a part in that?

In chapter 48, Emma confronts Mariam Fisk when Mariam insults Hoke. She also sings *Amazing Grace* at the funeral. How do these events mark a change in her life? What was her journey in this novel?

How do the lyrics of the song at the end of the book mirror the change that Boady went through?

(CCRA.R.3, CCRA.R.9)

**SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS.**

**1) Before beginning the novel, ask the students if they believe themselves to be prejudiced. Discuss what they understand “being prejudiced to mean. When they are finished with the novel, have that same discussion and see if their opinions have changed.**

(CCRA.W.10)

**2) In chapter five, Boady argues that he is not prejudiced because he doesn’t believe folks should be made to drink out of different water fountains “just cuz of their skin color.” He equates prejudice with the overt racism and mindset of the Jim Crow era. Research laws and norms that governed society during the Jim-Crow era.**

(CCRA.W.7)

**3) In Chapter eight, Boady uses a racist term (N-rigging), which he has no qualms with because, as he says, “it’s just an expression.” Society is full of terms that have origins in bigotry of one form or another, some more obvious than others. Research and discuss the etymology of such words and terms as:**

**gypped, Indian-giver, peanut gallery, tipping point, grandfather clause, eenie-meenie-miny-moe, uppity, sold down the river, and Jim Crow.**

**(CCRA.R.4, CCRA.W.7, CCRA.W.8, CCRA.L.4, CCRA.L.5, CCRA.SL.1)**

**4) In chapter nine, Boady complains to Hoke that his use of the N-word shouldn't have caused Thomas to get upset as "it was just an expression." Boady further tries to justify his use of the word by pointing out that he had heard black people use that word. Hoke explains that some words carry the weight of history and that blacks might have the prerogative to use that word, where Boady does not. Maligned groups will sometimes assume the use of a harmful word in order to undercut its harm. This is known as reappropriation. How might reappropriating a word such as the N-word change its ability to cause cultural harm? What other words have been reappropriated in our society?**

**(CCRA.R.4, CCRA.W.7, CCRA.W.8, CCRA.L.4, CCRA.L.5, CCRA.SL.1)**

**5) In chapter 25, Hoke tells Boady the story of Emmett Till. It is a story that Boady had never heard before. Research civil rights martyrs such as Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, George Winston Lee, Jimmie Lee Jackson, Lamar Smith, James Earl Reese, Herbert Lee, Virgil Ware, the girls from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church (Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole**

**Robertson and Cynthia Wesley), James Earl Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Henry Schwerner – among many others.**

(CCRA.W.7, CCRA.W.8)

**6 One of the themes of the novel is the power of our human instinct to divide people into groups (us versus them) as a way for one group to raise itself up by putting another down. Have students write a paper on what groups in their schools they feel look down upon them, and what prejudices fed into that division. Have students also look at themselves and write about whether they believe they (consciously or subconsciously) stereotype others or prejudice others in a way that might be unfair.**

(CCRA.W.2)