John ‘Corey’ Whatley grew up in the small town of Springhill, Louisiana, where he learned to be sarcastic and to tell stories. He has a B.A. in English from Louisiana Tech University, as well as an M.A in Secondary English Education. He started writing stories about aliens and underwater civilizations when he was around ten or eleven, but now writes realistic YA fiction (which sometimes includes zombies…). He taught public school for five years and spent much of that time daydreaming about being a full-time writer…and dodging his students’ crafty projectiles. He is terrible at most sports, but is an avid kayaker and bongo player. He is obsessed with movies, music, and traveling to new places. He is an incredibly picky eater and has never been punched in the face, though he has come quite close. His favorite word is defenestration. His favorite color is green. His favorite smell is books. See some other questions below.

- **What were your previous occupations?** I've been an assistant to a Folklorist and a teacher. There may or may not have been some sandwich making at a certain sub chain in my past as well.
- **What is your favorite job?** Writing was, is, and will always be my favorite job.
- **Where did you go to High school?** I went to high school in my hometown, Springhill, Louisiana.
- **How would you describe your life in only 8 words?** Formerly cynical with a renewed sense of wonderment.
- **What is your motto or maxim?** Good writing is never forced.
- **How would you describe perfect happiness?** Perfect happiness? If it exists, I think it’s less of a situation and more of a mental state. I don’t think anyone, no matter what, can find perfect happiness until they understand exactly who they are and how every little thing they do can effect the world around them. I think perfect happiness would be a world where everyone is constantly striving to understand everyone else.
- **With whom in history do you most identify?** Edgar Allan Poe-but only because we're both writers and we share the same birthday.
- **Which living person do you most admire?** Harper Lee—for writing a book that will never cease to be of vast importance.
- **What are your most overused words or phrases?** I tend to say "cool" a lot. And also "awesome." I guess it could be worse.
- **What is your greatest achievement?** Aside from getting my first novel published, I’d say my greatest achievement has been teaching public school for five years without freaking out.
- **Who is your favorite fictional hero?** Atticus Finch.
- **Who is your favorite fictional villain?** The Misfit from Flannery O’Connor’s *A Good Man is Hard to Find*.
- **Who are your favorite authors?** Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Harper Lee, J.D. Salinger, Sherman Alexie, Dave Eggers, David Levithan, Jonathan Safran Foer, Flannery O’Connor
- **Do you have one sentence of advice for new writers?** Yes. Wait until a story comes to you that you have to write; wanting isn't good enough.

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- Please ignore *Vera Dietz* by A. S. King
- *Wrestling Sturbridge* by Rich Wallace
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- *Angel of mercy* by Lurlene McDaniel
- *Somewhere in the darkness* by Walter Dean Myers
- *Losing is not an option* by Rich Wallace
- *Middle row* by Sylvia Olsen
What’s it all about?

Just when seventeen-year-old Cullen Witter thinks he understands everything about his small and painfully dull Arkansas town, it all disappears... In the summer before Cullen's senior year, a nominally-depressed bird-watcher named John Barling thinks he spots a species of woodpecker thought to be extinct since the 1940s in Lily, Arkansas. His rediscovery of the so-called Lazarus Woodpecker sparks a flurry of press and woodpecker-mania. Soon all the kids are getting woodpecker haircuts and everyone's eating "Lazarus burgers." But as absurd as the town's carnival atmosphere has become, nothing is more startling than the realization that Cullen’s sensitive, gifted fifteen-year-old brother Gabriel has suddenly and inexplicably disappeared. While Cullen navigates his way through a summer of finding and losing love, holding his fragile family together, and muddling his way into adulthood, a young missionary in Africa, who has lost his faith, is searching for any semblance of meaning wherever he can find it. As distant as the two stories seem at the start, they are thoughtfully woven ever closer together and through masterful plotting, brought face to face in a surprising and harrowing climax.

Discussion Questions

1) The Book of Enoch, Gabriel, and the Fallen Angels are themes that tie together many of the main characters in complex ways. How do you view and interpret this element of the book as it relates to specific characters’ lives, to the meaning of religion, and to the intelligence and potential of humankind?

2) Cabot Searcy takes on a mission he believes was Benton’s idea. Why do you think Cabot becomes so obsessed with the Book of Enoch? Was he crazy? A religious zealot? Or was he simply a misguided soul looking for his own second chance?

3) Over the course of the novel, Cullen exhibits cynicism, hope, idealism, and sometimes despair. Is he acting out the stages of grief over his missing brother, or is he simply a typical, unhappy teenager trying to figure out his life? Think of the other missing brothers and sons in the novel (Oslo, Lucas’s brother, Benton Sage)—what is the significance of these characters’ stories? How do they relate to the themes of desperation and second chances that are explored in the story?

4) Cullen has a very deep and loving connection with his brother, Gabriel. In what ways do Cullen and Gabriel appear to be a typical pair of teenage brothers? In what ways does their relationship strike you as unique or special?

5) Lily, Arkansas, is a town where things come back—both in a positive and negative sense. Discuss both sides of this theme and the implications for the town of Lily. Do you think that Cullen Witter will end up staying in Lily?

6) The author calls Where Things Come Back a book about second chances. What are some of the second chances that characters get in this novel? Specifically consider John Barling and Benton Sage in addition to the main characters. Are they always successful? Do things always turn out as they hope?

7) What is the significance of the Lazarus woodpecker—the bird that caused such excitement in the town of Lily, but which never actually existed there? How can the Lazarus be interpreted symbolically?

8) The author describes many different kind of love in this story: parental love, fraternal love, romantic love, and love for God. What does the novel say about each?


10) Cullen and Gabriel both find comfort in music throughout the novel. What is the significance of the various lyrics quoted within Cullen’s narrative, and how do they relate to the scenes in which they are used?

11) Consider the format of the novel and the movement of time: how we alternate between Cullen, Benton, and Cabot’s stories, and between first and third person narrators, until the story lines converge at the very end. How did the author’s approach to time affect your reading and comprehension of the novel? How did you anticipate that the various narrative threads would intersect or be resolved?

12) Discuss the quirks of Cullen’s voice—for example, his lists, his fantasies, his third-person phrasing. How did Cullen’s voice influence your view of his story? How does it help us understand his mindset as the narrator?

13) Cullen keeps a running list of title for books that he could write in the future. Consider your own life, both important events and inconsequential moments, like Cullen does. What are some titles that would fit your personal story?

14) Where Things Come Back is Cullen’s final title idea and becomes the title of this novel. What is the significance of this title being the final line of the book? What does it imply about what happens at the end of the novel?

The discussion questions came from the Simon & Schuster Reading Group Guide for Where Things Come Back.