Reader Extras · For Educators & Book Clubs

The Escape Artist

Discussion & Reading Guide

The Escape Artist is the first novel in the UBU Adventure series, an interactive fiction format for ages 14 through 17 in which the reader becomes the protagonist. The reader is Lester Honeycutt, a small-town magician with a dream of becoming a living legend, and the reader's choices determine what kind of legend, if any, Lester becomes. The book contains **30 endings across 42 decision inflection points**, of which only four are complete life cycles. The rest end earlier, some triumphantly, some quietly, some with a knife.

This guide is built for the high school classroom, the advanced middle-school reader ready for it, and the adult book club working with interactive fiction for the first time. It is organized in six sections: themes, choice-point discussion questions, vocabulary, classroom and book-club activities, Common Core ELA alignment, and an essay-prompt bank.

§ SECTION 1

Themes worth pulling at

Escape as flight versus escape as transformation.
The book's title carries two meanings throughout. Lester wants to escape into something (a larger life, a greater self) and escape from something (a small town, an ordinary fate, his father's death, his mother's expectations). At every choice, the reader is asked to decide whether Lester is running toward his calling or running away from his life. The distinction is rarely clean.

What does fame cost, and who pays?
The four "complete life cycle" endings differ in what Lester sacrifices to reach legend status. Becky, Mom, Niles, and Lester's integrity are not all preserved across paths. The reader is asked, again and again, what trade is worth making and what is not.

Ordinary versus extraordinary.
A subset of endings have Lester returning home to a quiet life, sometimes with peace and sometimes with regret. The book does not flatten the ordinary life into failure. Several quiet endings are framed as the right choice. The questions become: who decides what is extraordinary, and is the answer always the same answer?

Choice and identity.
The author's opening note states that the choices in this book do not just decide what happens next, they decide who Lester becomes. This is an unusually strong claim for a choose-your-own-adventure book and is worth pressing on. Is identity made by accumulating choices, or do choices reveal an identity that was already there?

The cost of the life you are leaving behind.
The author frames every ending with the same question: *is the life you want worth the cost of the life you are leaving behind?* The phrasing matters. It is not asking whether the life you are leaving behind was good. It is asking whether the new life justifies the leaving.

§ SECTION 2

Choice-point discussion questions

These questions are tied to specific decision inflection points in the manuscript. Page numbers are the book's story-page numbers (the same page numbers the choices reference). Use the questions live during a class read-aloud, or revisit after a reader has reached an ending and is reflecting on the path taken.

Page 13 — Volunteering for the Chinese Water Torture

Lester can raise his hand, refuse to raise his hand, or nudge Niles to volunteer instead. What does each choice reveal about how Lester sees risk, attention, and friendship? Is it cowardice or care to send Niles forward in your place?

Page 22 — Your name (and your stage name)

Asked his name on stage, Lester can give "Lester Honeycutt" or invent "Bartholomew Breedlove." What is the moral cost of inventing a stage name on the spot? When is reinvention an act of integrity, and when is it the first lie?

Page 21 — "Is this lock real?"

When Oudini asks, Lester can say "yes, as far as I can tell" or "no, you've probably got a fake lock there." What does it mean to expose a master's trick on his own stage? Is the truth always the right move?

Page 42 — Showing the bleeding hands

Lester jumps through the curtains and shows the audience his bleeding hands to make the point that "things don't always go as planned." When does authenticity become spectacle? Is Lester being honest, or is he learning that pain sells?

Multiple pages — Becky's requests

Across multiple branches Becky asks Lester to come home, to stop performing, to no longer risk himself. In some endings Lester accepts this and his quiet endings follow; in some he refuses and his life-cycle endings follow. Is Becky right? Is the question even "right"?

Page 92 — The mysterious address (84 North Highway 1)

Lester realizes he didn't sign up for this when Oudini sends him on what could be a trap. What is the difference between loyalty and complicity? When is it correct to walk away from a mentor whose work has begun to ask too much?

Page 132 — One last performance

Lester cancels the busted barrel stunt and does one last Chinese Water Torture on Broadway. What does it mean for an artist to choose the safe ending of a great career? Is it dignity or is it cowardice in another form?

The four "best" endings (pp. 183, 186, 187, 189)

Compare the four complete life cycles. What does each of them sacrifice that the others protect? Is one of them more honest about what greatness costs? If you could only have one, which would you choose for Lester, and why?

§ SECTION 3

Vocabulary and reference

Words and references in *The Escape Artist* that may be unfamiliar to YA readers. Suggested for vocabulary work in tandem with the reading.

Houdini-tradition references

Oudini, Chinese Water Torture, straightjacket escape, the busted barrel stunt — all reference real techniques and stunts from the tradition of Harry Houdini (1874-1926). Background reading on Houdini enriches the book significantly.

Vaudeville and the touring magician

The world of small-town theaters, traveling acts, and the paid-attendance touring circuit that supported magicians and performers from the 1880s through the mid-20th century.

Stage name

A performer's adopted public name, often more memorable or evocative than their birth name. The choice to take or refuse a stage name appears multiple times in the book and always carries weight.

Escape artist

A specific kind of magician whose act centers on escaping bondage, restraints, or impossible situations. Distinct from illusionists or sleight-of-hand magicians.

Knife-thrower / target girl

The historic act of Heinrich and Consuela. The "target girl" tradition involved a real risk to a real human and is worth discussing as a question of consent, performance, and danger.

Living legend

A person whose reputation is large enough during their lifetime that they are spoken of as if already historical. The book's explicit goal for Lester. Worth asking what the term implies and what it costs.

"If one has not grabbed for immortality, one has not lived"

Lester's gravestone in one of the four best endings. The line is worth a discussion all on its own. Source: paraphrased from Romantic-era thinking on the artist as hero.

§ SECTION 4

Activities for the classroom and the book club

The "What I Chose" map.
Each student or member completes the Decision Tree Matrix (the companion download). They mark the endings they have personally reached and the order in which they reached them. Discussion: did your second reading take you to a fundamentally different version of Lester? Or did the patterns of your choosing repeat?

The thirty-second case for one ending.
Each member is assigned one of the 30 endings at random and given five minutes to prepare a thirty-second argument that this ending is the right life for Lester Honeycutt. The cases are delivered in sequence. Hold a vote afterward.

Rewrite a fork.
Choose one of the major decision points (page 13, page 22, page 42, page 132). Each student rewrites the page so that a third option exists. They must justify in 200 words what their third option would lead to and how it would change the eventual ending.

The three knives.
The author warns that some endings come "with a knife." Identify the three deaths that involve a knife or a knife-equivalent (the bullet, the train, the river). Discuss: what is the book arguing about violence as a possible cost of pursuing greatness? Is the violence punishment, consequence, or randomness?

Becky's book.
Rewrite the book from Becky's point of view. She is not the protagonist of *The Escape Artist*, but she is in nearly every branch and her requests shape Lester's endings. What is the story she is living? Is Lester her hero or her problem?

The fifth best ending.
There are four complete life cycles. Write a fifth one that the book did not give us. What paths through the existing decision tree could have produced it? What was the author's argument for not including it?

§ SECTION 5

Common Core ELA alignment

Suggested standards alignment for grades 9-12. *The Escape Artist* is well-suited to reading-literature, writing-narrative, and speaking-and-listening standards. Below are specific anchor standards the book most directly serves.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3 / RL.11-12.3 — Character development across choices

The book's structure makes character development a function of reader decision rather than authorial decision. This is unusually clean material for analyzing how an author develops a character through a sequence of decisions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.5 / RL.11-12.5 — Author's structural choices

Interactive fiction is itself a structural choice. The book's 42 decision inflection points and 30 endings invite direct analysis of how the form shapes meaning. Compare to traditional narrative structure.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6 — Point of view and the second person

The book is written in second person ("you are Lester Honeycutt"). This is a deliberate craft choice that collapses reader and protagonist. Suitable for analysis of how POV decisions change the contract between writer and reader.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3 / W.11-12.3 — Narrative writing with branching structure

The "Rewrite a fork" activity above directly addresses narrative writing standards. Students produce alternative branches and justify the consequences, exercising both creative and analytical writing.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 / SL.11-12.1 — Collaborative discussion

The choice-point questions in Section 2 are explicitly built for small-group or whole-class discussion. Each question is open-ended and invites disagreement.

§ SECTION 6

Essay prompts (for assessment or book-club writing)

• Choose two endings from different categories (a "complete life cycle" and a "quiet" or "tragic" ending). Argue, with specific textual evidence, which one represents the more honest answer to the book's central question: *is the life you want worth the cost of the life you are leaving behind?*

• The book is written in second person. Write 750 to 1,000 words analyzing how the second-person point of view changes your relationship to Lester's choices. Would the same choices feel different in third person? Use specific scenes.

• Becky asks Lester to come home in multiple branches. In some, he listens. In some, he doesn't. Argue whether the book treats Becky as an obstacle to Lester's greatness or as a protector of his soul. Use textual evidence from at least three branches.

• Compare *The Escape Artist* to a non-interactive coming-of-age novel you have read. How does the interactive form change what coming-of-age means in this book? What does the reader's participation give to or take from the genre?

• Lester's gravestone in one of the best endings reads: *"If one has not grabbed for immortality, one has not lived."* Argue whether the book itself agrees with this line. Use endings from at least two categories to build your case.

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Before (or after) the book: play the opening

The first chapter, free in any browser · built for a classroom projector

The opening of The Escape Artist is playable online. Students read the pages on screen, and every time Lester reaches a decision, the class votes by show of hands · the tallies appear on screen, majority rules, and the room lives with what it chooses, all the way to one of the nine endings reachable in the free demo. A second pass, changing a single vote, lands a completely different ending: the fastest demonstration of the book's central idea that choices compound into a life.

To run it with a class:

1. Open the address below on the room's projector or smartboard.
2. Add ?live to the address for presenter mode: choice cards become vote counters.
3. Read aloud (or hand pages to student readers), vote at every fork, and see where the room lands.
4. Ten to fifteen minutes reaches an ending; thirty minutes allows the second, contrasting run.

Scan, or type:

chadprevost.com/ea

Works on any phone, laptop, or smartboard. No app, no login. Students can replay at home and hunt the endings the class missed.

The Escape Artist · An IF/THEN Books UBU Adventure · by Chad Prevost · Illustrations by Annabelle Tarter · Published by IF/THEN Books, an imprint of Crossroads Press · For the Decision Tree Matrix and ordering, visit crossroadspublishing.group/extras/the-escape-artist