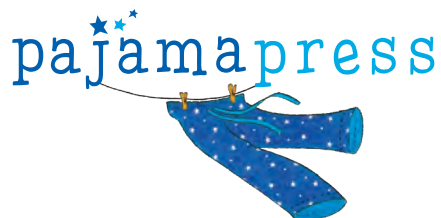


NIX MINUS ONE

Jill MacLean

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Created by Erin Woods



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STORY SUMMARY

Nix Humbolt doesn't talk much. Though at fifteen he's taller and leaner than in his "Fatty Humbolt" days, he still lies low at school. At home Nix finds refuge in his father's workshop where he builds intricate boxes and tables—and avoids arguments with his polar-opposite older sister. Roxy is so alive the air around her vibrates. He'd slay ten dragons for her, but she drives him crazy—especially when she decides to go after Bryan Sykes. The guy is seriously toxic, but Roxy won't listen, so what can Nix do? The only battles he ever fights are on his Xbox—until the day he finds the guts to fight for Swiff Dunphy's neglected dog Twig won't win any beauty contests, but Nix is determined to save her. And when things start to spiral out of control, she might just be the one who saves him.

[Pajama Press, 2013]

Award-winning author Jill MacLean lives and writes in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Learn more about her at: www.jillmaclean.com

FURTHER READING:

For more information about helping abused animals, see Rob Laidlaw's *No Shelter Here: Making the World a Kinder Place for Dogs* (Pajama Press 2011), or see the infographic at the end of this document.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When you found out *Nix Minus One* was written in free verse instead of more traditional prose, what was your first impression? Did that impression change after reading the book?
2. Author Jill MacLean set *Nix Minus One* in Bullbirds Cove, a small, fictional town on the west coast of Newfoundland's northern peninsula. Most of her readers have never lived in small-town Newfoundland, but many of Nix's feelings and experiences are familiar. What aspects of your own life can you recognize in Nix's story?

3. What do you think made Nix, in spite of his shyness, decide to ask Swiff permission to walk his dog?
4. How would you describe the relationship between Nix and Chase at the beginning of the story? What do you think drew them together?
5. Because Nix doesn't talk very much, he struggles in school (see page 36). Do you think it is reasonable that schools expect oral participation from everyone, introverts and extroverts alike? Is there a system you would prefer?
6. Why do you think Twig became so important to Nix?
7. Have you ever worked on a project for so many hours that, like Nix with his table, you were afraid of marring it in the final steps? How did that feel? Was it worth the anxiety?
8. "Only place I'm 100 percent / is in the workshop," says Nix (page 68). What does he mean? What places or activities make you feel "100 percent"?
9. How would you describe Nix's relationship with Roxy? How similar or different is it from other brother-sister relationships you know?
10. What did you think when Nix's mother reacted so badly to the table he made for her birthday? How would you feel in Nix's place?
11. Why do you think Nix didn't tell his parents about Roxy's drinking?
12. Why did Nix find it so easy to talk to Blue? Why did that stress him out?
13. Why did Nix's dad send Twig back with Swiff? Do you think he would have done the same thing if he had already seen Arnie abuse her?
14. Why was it important to Nix's father to make the coffin himself?

15. When Nix sees Giuseppe Penone’s carving of the sapling inside the dead tree, he says “I sit there / like I’ve been shot” (page 240) Have you ever had a similar reaction to something? What was it?

16. Why does Kendel treat Nix differently after he fights with Bryan? Can you draw conclusions from this about why Kendel used to pick on him?

17. When Roxy said she was studying at Kaitlin’s house, Nix observes that his mother “swallowed it whole. Like always” (page 1). Having read “**They’re both waiting for me**” (page 254), do you believe his parents did “swallow it whole”? Why might they have chosen to accept Roxy’s lies? What would you have done in their place?

18. “Took me all this time / to get mad at her,” Nix says to Blue on page 273. How did that anger help Nix deal with his grief?

19. The back of the book says, “Twig won’t win any beauty contests, but Nix is determined to save her. And when things start to spiral out of control, she might just be the one who saves him.” What do you think this means? Do you agree?

**THE COD MORATORIUM
(GEOGRAPHY, DEMOGRAPHICS)**

Materials: Chalkboard or whiteboard; Internet

Preparation: Research the primary employers in your community. If there are many, list the top ten.

SECTORS OF INDUSTRY

Primary Sector: Primary sector industries provide raw materials by harvesting a natural resource. Examples are fisheries, mining, and farming.

Secondary Sector: Secondary sector industries manufacture a product. Examples are factories, bakeries, and artisans.

Tertiary Sector: Tertiary sector industries provide a service. Examples are banking, sales, and tourism.

Quaternary Sector: This relatively new term describes an industry that produces intellectual output. Examples are education, libraries, and government. These fields used to be considered part of the tertiary sector.

Directions:

PART ONE: BULLBIRDS COVE

1. Read “**Bullbirds Cove**” (page 9) and “**Before the moratorium**” (page 12).

2. Visit the Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage website and read “Cod Moratorium” (introduction and “Fishing Technology”) at www.heritage.nf.ca/society/moratorium.html and “Moratorium Impacts” (introduction and “Financial Aid Programs”) at www.heritage.nf.ca/society/moratorium_impacts.html.

3. Discuss:

On page 2 Swift Dunphy jokes, “If you’re waitin’ for a handout, you’ll wait longer than a jig / for a twenty-pound cod.” What did he mean?

What do you think would have happened to Nix’s family if his father had not taught himself woodworking?

Can you think of any other communities where most of the residents are employed in the same industry? What would happen if that industry were to shut down?

PART TWO: OUR COMMUNITY

1. Provide students with the information included in the “Sectors of Industry” sidebar.

2. Brainstorm a list of various jobs included in each industry sector.

3. On the chalkboard or whiteboard, write the list you compiled of primary employers in your community. Have the students sort them into their various sectors.

4. Discuss:

Are any of the four sectors more prevalent in our community? Why do you think that is?

What would happen if one of these major employers were to disappear? Which would have the greatest impact? The least impact?

How do geography (the physical features of a region) and demographics (the characteristics of the population that lives in a region) affect the types of industry that develop?

Which do you think is more sustainable: a community that relies heavily on one sector of industry, or one that has employers in many sectors? Why?

GIUSEPPE PENONE

(ART, RESEARCH)

Materials: Internet and other research materials; pen and paper or word processor; art materials

Preparation: Determine the curriculum requirement for a research assignment completed by students in your grade.

Directions:

1. Nix is inspired by the work of Giuseppe Penone. Tell students to choose an artist whose work appeals to them. They will research that artist and write a report that complies with the curriculum requirements for their grade.
2. Have students find a photograph that has some meaning to them. It can be a picture they have taken or an image that reminds them of something significant.
3. Using their picture as inspiration, students will now create an art project in the style of their chosen artist. If the materials their artist works with are not available, they should discuss alternate materials with you.

IN FEWER WORDS

(WRITING)

Materials: Lined paper, pencils

Directions:

1. Jill MacLean’s free verse style in *Nix Minus One* uses very few words to communicate powerful messages and emotions. Tell students they are going to do something similar in this activity.
2. Have students think about a time in their life during which they experienced strong emotions. These could be positive emotions like love or excitement, or negative emotions like fear or anger. Encourage students to brainstorm about this experience by jotting down specific images and feelings that have stuck in their memory.
3. Instruct students to write a few detailed paragraphs describing the experience. Encourage them to describe exactly what they saw, heard, felt, tasted, etc.
4. Once their detailed descriptions are complete, instruct students to re-write the experience in as few words as possible while still capturing the sensual and

emotional breadth of the memory. They do not have to write in free verse form, but they may choose to do so.

5. Discuss:

Which piece of writing seems more powerful to you? Why do you think that is?

Which details did you decide to keep in your short version? What made them important?

What does “immediacy” mean in writing? How does writing in this style contribute to a reader’s experience of immediacy when reading a book?

THE BARRENS

(BIOLOGY, ECOSYSTEMS)

Materials: The Barrens Crossword Puzzle resource (attached); Internet or other research materials; pen or pencil; two pieces of graph paper per student

Directions:

1. Reading *Nix Minus One*, we learn a lot about Newfoundland’s barrens. Challenge students to search the book for references to the plants, animals, and geographical features found in this environment, then fit them into The Barrens Crossword Puzzle. They may also use the clues on the puzzle resource to come up with the correct words.
2. Have students pick a different environment to research (e.g. the Boreal forest, the Great Barrier Reef, the Eastern Egyptian Desert, etc.). Ask them to create lists of plants, animals, and geographical features from this environment along with definitions or descriptions.
3. Hand out two pieces of graph paper to each student. On one they will create their “answer key” crossword. On the other they will create a blank crossword puzzle with a list of clues for a friend to fill out.

Extension: As a class, do some further research into the barrens and your own local environment. You may compare the two by creating charts of weather patterns, graphs of species distribution, and/or Venn diagrams of plants, animals, and geographical features.

ON THE BIG SCREEN

(CRITICAL THINKING, ART, ORAL PRESENTATION)

Materials: Writing paper, pencils, poster-sized paper, markers

Directions:

1. Tell students they are going to plan for a movie version of *Nix Minus One*. They may work in pairs for this activity.
2. Have each pair choose which famous actors they would like to play each major role in *Nix Minus One*. They must be able to justify each choice.
3. Pass out scrap paper on which each pair will plan a movie poster to promote their film. Encourage them to think hard about what image they will display on the poster since this is what will draw viewers in. Pass out poster-sized paper for their final drafts.
4. Have students present their poster and cast lists as if they are actually proposing this movie and trying to gain their classmates' support.

Extension: Have students create a movie trailer to advertise *Nix Minus One* the movie.

BOXES AND FRAMES

(THEMES, RECURRING IMAGES)

Materials: Lined paper, pencils

Directions:

1. Think about the theme of boxes and frames in this book:

- Nix can't forget Roxy's taunt that he lives life in a box
- He treasures the chance to build a box for Loren
- Nix discovers that Roxy loved the box he made for her, then

smashes it to express his anger at her

- When he smashes the picture frames he thinks, "we're all framed in wood, our stupid little lives" (page 271)

- He plans to use the fragments of Roxy's box for inlay on a three-part picture frame for the pictures she saved of him

2. Ask: What does Nix's changing perception of boxes and frames reveal about his character development?

3. Have students choose another recurring theme or image from the book (e.g. "fear" vs. "fierce," the colour yellow, etc.).

4. Ask students to create a timeline and, above it, mark down the book's references to their chosen theme. Below the line, ask them to note Nix's major emotional developments (e.g. finding the courage to fight for Twig, growing out of his crush on Loren, learning to be angry at Roxy, etc.).

5. Discuss:

Does your theme seem to be connected to a particular emotion or relationship?

Why do authors use recurring themes and images? How do they help the reader?

Can you think of an object or idea in your own life that has been meaningful to you at significant times?

MONOLOGUES

(DRAMA, WRITING)

Materials: Writing paper, pencils

Directions:

1. Ask the class to come up with a list of familiar monologues in movies or plays.

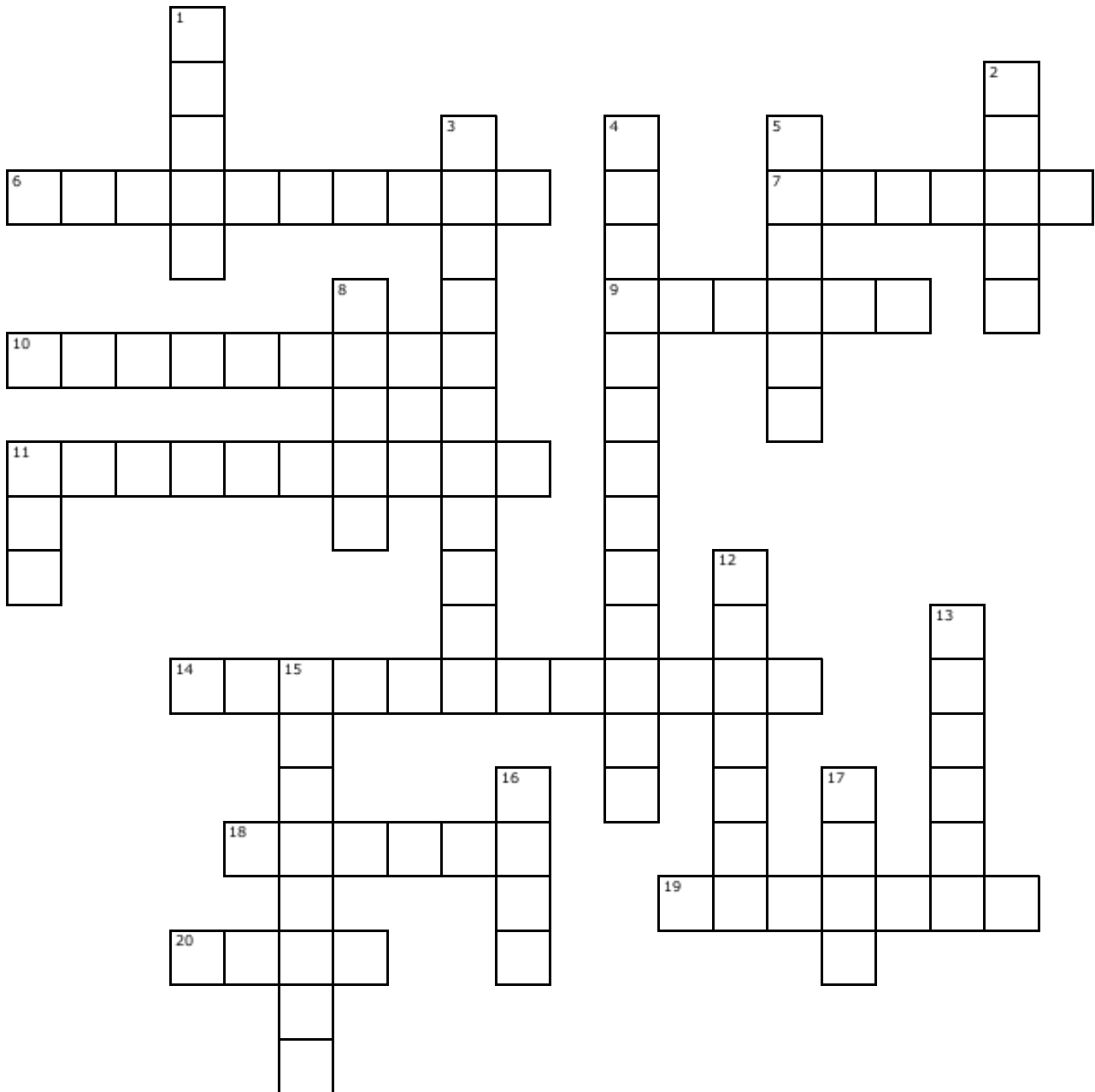
2. Ask, *How do these monologues help us better understand the characters who speak them?*

3. Have students choose a character (other than Nix or Roxy) who interests them. Ask them to think about how this character might have been affected by Roxy's accident.

4. Ask students to write a monologue for their chosen character that expresses the character's feelings on the day following the accident.

5. Have students perform their monologues for the class.

The Barrens Crossword Puzzle



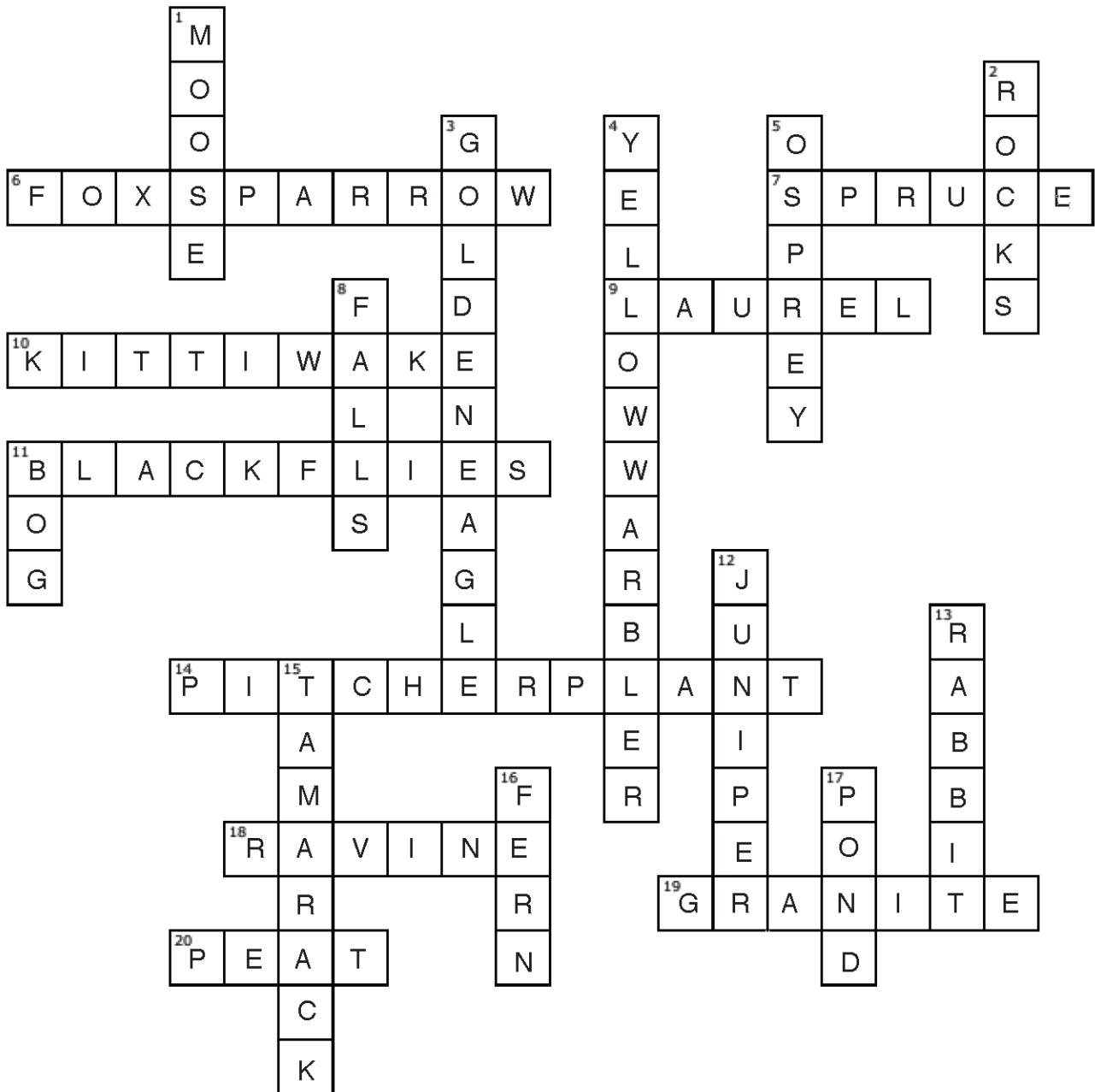
Across

- 6.** A small, sturdy bird that kicks up leaves on the ground to find food
- 7.** A class of short-needed evergreen trees
- 9.** A shrub with evergreen leaves and deep pink flowers
- 10.** A small gull that nests in cliffs
- 11.** The males of this insect species feed on nectar; the females prefer blood
- 14.** A carnivorous plant that traps insects
- 18.** A narrow, steep-sided valley usually created by water erosion
- 19.** A common stone made of quartz, feldspar, and mica
- 20.** This partially-decayed plant matter is most commonly made of Sphagnum moss

Down

- 1.** The largest member of the deer family
- 2.** These may be metamorphic, igneous, or sedimentary
- 3.** A large bird of prey with dark brown feathers on its body and light brown feathers on its head
- 4.** A small, bright yellow songbird
- 5.** Also known as a fish hawk
- 8.** Also known as a cataract
- 11.** A wetland characterized by peat
- 12.** A prickly coniferous shrub
- 13.** When adults, these mammals are called "bucks" and "does"; the young are called "kittens"
- 15.** This tree has needles that turn yellow and fall in autumn
- 16.** These typically form fiddleheads before they unfurl
- 17.** A small body of standing water

The Barrens Crossword Puzzle



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IF YOU SUSPECT ANIMAL ABUSE

DOES THE ANIMAL HAVE:

An untreated injury, protruding bones, or patchy fur?

IS THE ANIMAL

being abused physically?

IS THE ANIMAL

left permanently on a chain or in a cage?

DOES THE ANIMAL LACK:

Food, water, shelter or veterinary treatment?



NO

to ALL of the above

YES

to ANY of the above

COLLECT EVIDENCE



Videos



Photographs



Eyewitness Reports



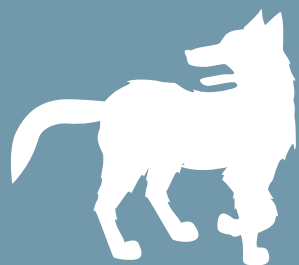
A Concise Personal Report

ALWAYS INCLUDE SIGNATURES AND DATES AND MAKE SURE YOU HAVE AN ADULT'S HELP



KEEP MONITORING THE SITUATION

or contact the SPCA or Humane Society for advice



CALL THE AUTHORITIES

You can find phone numbers for your local SPCA or humane society by looking in a phone book or on the Internet—or contact your local police department.



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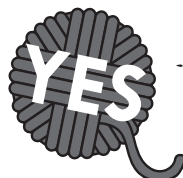


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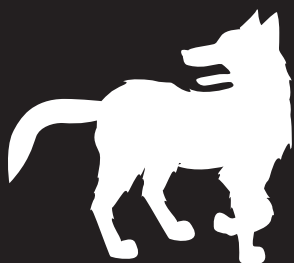


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