



# All Night

Alan Cumyn

**Reading Level: 2**

**Interest Level: Adult**

## Book Summary

Jess and Gregor live in a cold basement apartment. Gregor is a comedian who stacks chairs for a living. Jess is an actor who works in a restaurant. The sudden death of their close friend, Peter, forces them to think about their lives. They stay up all night talking, loving, arguing. Gregor lives for the moment, the next smile. Jess wants to make plans. This is the night of truth. Who are they? What do they want? What do they mean to each other? Will Peter's death mark the end of Jess and Gregor's life together?

## Author Biography

Alan Cumyn began writing poetry and short stories in high school. Today, he is the award-winning author of twelve novels. His human rights novels, *Man of Bone* and *Burridge Unbound*, both won the Ottawa Book Award. Alan lives in Ottawa and teaches writing with the Vermont College of Fine Arts.

*Note to the educator: The following activities are suggestions only. Please choose and adjust the projects and questions according to the specific needs and level of your students as well as their experience with doing novel studies. Students can work individually, in pairs, or in small groups.*

**THINKING ABOUT THE BOOK****Book Cover and Title**

Read the title to the students. Ask them to describe what they see on the front cover. Ask them who and what they think the story might be about.

**WORKING WITH THE BOOK****Characters**

As they read the book, have students note examples that show both Gregor and Jess live for the moment and make plans.

Character	Lives for the moment	Plans for the future
Gregor	<i>“I empty the last of the cereal in the bowl.”</i>	
Jess		<i>“That cereal is all we have for breakfast.”</i>

After reading the entire book, have students work in small groups and discuss the following questions, using their notes for reference:

- Some people live for the moment; others plan for the future. Most people are a little of both. Share examples that show Jess and Gregor were a little of both—both living in the moment and making plans.
- What words would you use to describe people who live for the moment and people who make plans? Make a list of describing words for each.
- Why do you think it is important to have characteristics of both people who live for the moment and people who make plans?

**Plot**

Even though Peter has died, he is an important character that moves the plot forward. As students read through the novel, have them note examples of how Peter influences Jess and Gregor, even in death.

**How Peter's character moves the plot forward after he dies**

*Peter's death and funeral is the reason Jess and Gregor stay up all night talking.*

After reading the entire book, have students work in small groups and share their notes. Then have them discuss the following questions:

- (a) What do you think is the most important way that Peter's death influenced Jess and Gregor's relationship?
- (b) Jess, Gregor, and Peter were in a close relationship. Describe the relationships among the three characters. What were each of the characters hiding about their relationships? Why do you think they were less than honest with one another?
- (c) Do you think it is possible to be in a relationship where both people are 100 percent honest with each other? Support your answer with reasons and examples.

## Setting

Explain to students that the setting provides details of when and where events take place. The details of the setting add to the story in some way. This story takes place in Jess and Gregor’s apartment, their home. As students read the book, have them add details that describe Jess and Gregor’s home and their dream home.

Jess and Gregor’s home	Jess and Gregor’s dream home
<i>The apartment is in an alley.</i>	

After reading the entire book, have students work in small groups and share their notes. Then tell the students that the setting, Jess and Gregor’s home, is connected to one of the main themes in the story—Jess and Gregor’s struggle to follow their dreams. Have the students discuss the following questions, keeping the theme in mind.

- (a) What are Jess and Gregor’s dreams? What sacrifice(s) do they make to follow their dreams?
- (b) Jess and Gregor feel “trapped.” Why do they feel this way? How does the apartment contribute to these feelings?

**TALKING ABOUT THE BOOK**

1. “The night is so cold.” (page 1)
  - (a) Read the opening lines of the story. What are Jess and Gregor doing on this cold night? How do they feel about the cold?
  - (b) What other details does the author use to show that the night is “so cold”?
  - (c) Why do you think the author chooses a cold, slushy night to begin the story?
  - (d) Compare the opening lines of the story with the last lines of the story. Think about the weather, Jess and Gregor’s relationship, and their feelings about the weather.
  
2. “She needs to believe enough to keep going.” (page 9)
  - (a) What is Gregor talking about specifically?
  - (b) What else does Jess need to believe about herself? How does Gregor help her believe?
  - (c) What factors affect people’s level of confidence?
  - (d) Think of a time when you did not believe you could do something. Why did you lack confidence? Did you try anyway? How did you feel?
  - (e) Who helps you build self-confidence? How do they help you build self-confidence? How do you help others build self-confidence?
  
3. “Life is showing us something here.” (page 16)
  - (a) What event in life is Jess referring to? What does she think this event is showing her and Gregor?
  - (b) Explain what Jess means by a “wake-up call”? How do you think Jess feels at this moment?
  - (c) Jess sees the death of a close young friend she loved as a wake-up call. What other events in life act as wake-up calls? What choices do people have when they receive a wake-up call from life?

4. “ ‘Not the elephants, I moan.’ ” (page 23)
  - (a) Summarize Jess’s story about the elephants.
  - (b) What is the elephant story saying about the nature of men and women? Do you think this is a fair description of men and women? Do you think it is a fair description of Jess and Gregor? Give reasons for your answer.
  
5. “I don’t feel as if I have ten years to spend on a risky career.” (page 27)
  - (a) What risky career was Jess talking about? Why do you think she described it as risky? What does this quote tell you about Jess and where she is in her life?
  - (b) What advice would you give to Jess at this moment?
  - (c) At what times in their lives do you think people question or think about where they are and where they’re going in life?
  - (d) Describe a risk you have taken in your life that made a change in your life. What barriers did you have to overcome? How did things turn out? In general, do you think people should take risks that might change their lives?
  
6. “Because words have power. More than we know.” (page 33)
  - (a) What words are Jess and Gregor talking about?
  - (b) What is Gregor’s e-mail password? Jess’s password? In what way do those passwords have “power”?
  - (c) Think about the password, or passwords, you use. What do your passwords say about you?
  - (d) Describe other times when the words people use have power.
  
7. “ ‘Sometimes it happens,’ I say.” (page 43)
  - (a) What sometimes happens, according to Gregor?
  - (b) Whose opinion about lucky breaks do you agree with? Jess’s or Gregor’s?
  - (c) Describe a lucky break you had. Was it totally luck? Or did you “help” the lucky break happen in some way?

8. “‘Who are you?’ she asks.” (page 58)
- (a) Why does Jess ask Gregor who he is? What has Gregor just offered to sacrifice for Jess?
  - (b) Why does Jess refuse what Gregor has offered?
  - (c) Should a person in a relationship ever ask the other person to give up a dream? Give reasons for your opinion.
  - (d) How do the following people influence a person’s dreams: (i) parents and caregivers, (ii) teachers, (iii) friends and peers, (iv) religious and spiritual leaders, and (v) government?
9. “It occurs to me that now I have to love her for both of us.” (page 64)
- (a) What do you think Gregor means with these words?
  - (b) Compare Gregor’s love for Jess with Jess’s love for Gregor.
  - (c) It is said that in every relationship one loves more than the other. Do you agree? Give reasons for your opinion.
10. “Just tell a story. That’s how we all get through every day. We tell stories.” (page 66)
- (a) Think about the careers Jess and Gregor are hoping for. Why would story-telling be important to them?
  - (b) Describe other times that story-telling is used in the book. Why do Jess and Gregor tell stories at those times?
  - (c) When else do people tell stories?
  - (d) Think about the last story you told. What was the story? Why did you tell it? How did you feel telling the story? How did you feel after telling the story?

**WRITING ABOUT THE BOOK**

1. Choose a character or event from the novel that you connected with in some way. For example, did the character or event remind you of something in your life? Cause an emotional reaction in you? Teach you something? Describe how and why in a paragraph.
2. Imagine you are Jess. Write a journal entry that describes how you felt when Gregor asked you to marry him, and why you finally said yes.
3. In the movie *The Bridges of Madison County*, the character played by Clint Eastwood said, “My dreams didn’t work out, but I’m glad I had them.” Think about a dream you have. Write a paragraph that describes what the dream is and why having the dream is important to you.
4. Write a deep, dark secret about yourself on a piece of paper. Then read what you have written. Think about how you feel as you read the words you have written. Rip the paper up. Write about the power of words.
5. Peter influenced Jess and Gregor even after he had died. Think about someone who continues to influence you, even though they are not in your daily life. It may be someone who has passed away or moved away or drifted out of your life for some reason. Write a letter to that person explaining how they have continued to influence you, and why.
6. Write a comment on Alan Cumyn’s official website telling him your opinion of his book.

## PROJECTS and ACTIVITIES

### 1. Read some fables

Jess uses the story of elephants to illustrate her opinions about men and women. Have a discussion with students about fables, which also use animal characters instead of human characters. Find out what students know about fables and which fables they already know. Then have students read a few fables that are new to them and have them discuss the fable in terms of the human characteristics of the animals and the point the fable was making.

### 2. Find a dream job

Have students think about how they would describe their dream job. Then have them write ads for their jobs. Pin all the ads up. Have students read all the job ads and then reply to one of the ads by writing a paragraph describing why they would be perfect for the job.

### 3. Compare songs about dreams

Have students search on the Internet for lyrics to two or three songs about dreams. Print out the lyrics and have the students compare the lyrics in terms of who is dreaming, what they are dreaming about, and why they are dreaming. Then have the students discuss if the dream is a daydream or a dream that the person really hopes to achieve.

#### **4. Explore the power of words**

Find an audio copy on the Internet of Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech "I Have a Dream." Give students some historical context for the speech before having the students listen to the speech. After they listen to the speech, have the students discuss the speech in terms of purpose, audience, and how the speech made them feel, and why. Then have them discuss how the speech is relevant in today's world. In small groups, have students discuss ideas for and write a speech on a similar theme for today's world.

#### **5. Explore weather and mood**

Have students brainstorm types of weather conditions and events (e.g. snowstorms, heat waves, hurricanes, floods, etc.) Then have students search images on the Internet that depict both the beauty and destruction of weather conditions and events, and choose two or three images that move them in some way. Have them explain how the images move them, and why. Finally, have students express in writing—through a poem, story, or journal entry—how weather affects them.

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*Coyote's Song*, Gail Anderson-Dargatz, Grass Roots Press

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