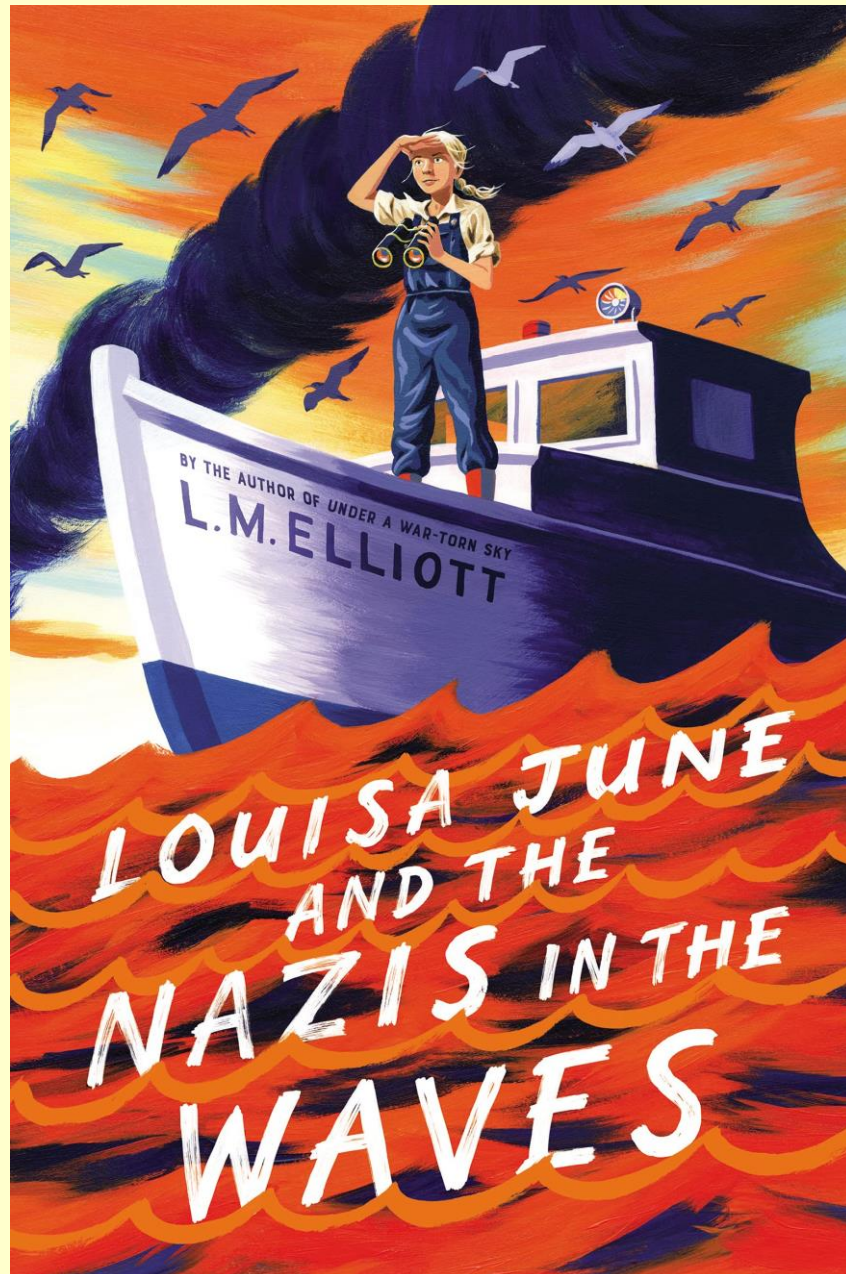


**Talking About Depression and Mental Health
with *Louisa June and the Nazis in the Waves***



DISCUSSION GUIDE

ABOUT THE BOOK AND THIS GUIDE

Louisa June and the Nazis in the Waves by L.M. Elliott is about a little-known aspect of World War II: A few days after Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, Hitler sent Nazi U-boats on a mission to the East Coast to torpedo as many U.S. cargo ships carrying fuel, supplies, and food as possible. Fictitious thirteen-year-old Louisa June experiences the first effects of this on her family's farm in coastal Tidewater Virginia when Butler, her beloved college-bound brother is killed, and her father injured when a German submarine fires on the family's tugboat. The death and destruction that U-boats are causing in her community moves Louisa June to find her own ways to do her part for the war effort as she and her family grieve.

Louisa June's story carries an additional theme about emotional health and depression. These are the first words readers hear from Louisa June: *"My mama has the melancholy. Always has. But recently it's gone from her customary pinkish-gray—like a dawn mist in the marshes, still hopeful and able to clear into bright blue with the right sprinkle of sunshine—to thick, storm-surge purple black."*

Depression is one of the most common mental health disorders in the United States. Approximately [15.6 million children—1 in 5—live with an parent who is severely depressed](#). More than [4% of children aged 3-17 \(approximately 2.7 million\)](#) have been diagnosed with depression. Yet, good, genuine discussion starters to talk about depression, anxiety, and mental illness in the classroom are scarce. *Louisa June and the Nazis in the Waves* can provide a springboard for conversation that allows students to talk and learn about these issues, confront the stigma of mental illness, gain empathy, and break stereotypes.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Before beginning, be sure students have and understand clear guidelines for discussing mental health issues respectfully, empathetically, and confidentially. Assure students that they don't have to reveal anything they feel is too personal or private.

- "My mama has the melancholy. Always has. But recently it's gone from her customary pinkish-gray—like a dawn mist in the marshes, still hopeful and able to clear into bright blue with the right sprinkle of sunshine—to thick, storm-surge purple black. Like rolling waves burning." Why do you think Louisa June describes her mother's mood this way? When you are feeling happy or sad, how would you describe your mood?
- Why do you agree or disagree with Cousin Belle's advice for dealing with sadness? (p. 179) Think about some times you felt sad. What did you do to make yourself feel better? How is depression different from feeling sad or feeling sorrow?
- Though referred to as melancholy—in keeping with the 1940s setting—Louisa June's mother has depression. What are the signs and symptoms of Mama's depression? How does she handle her depression? How does Louisa June try to help her mother? What are some ways to tell that someone is feeling depressed? What could you do to help someone who has mental or emotional health issues?

- How do others treat Mama? What are some negative or positive things said about her? How do these compare with things you have heard said about people with mental illness?
- What is stigma? Why do you think people with mental illness are stigmatized? What do you think influences perceptions about mental illness? What, if any, opinions about mental health do you see as changed since World War II?
- “Mama hadn't gotten out of her bed for more than a month now.” (p. 112) People who are depressed tend to withdraw from others. Why do you think this happens? How does this affect their depression? How does it affect Louisa June? Why doesn't she share her concerns with Emmett? Who would you be comfortable talking with about mental health issues that you or a family member have?
- Louisa June is afraid she is like Mama. What makes her think that? What symptoms do grief and depression share? How are they distinct experiences?
- In talking with Cousin Belle about Mama's affliction, Louisa June “realized why she had insisted on installing our phone and that Mama call once a week.” (p. 180) What did Louisa June come to understand? Why is it important to have a variety of people available to support you? Who in your life could you turn to for help?
- Why is it so important for someone with depression to get help from trained experts, medical professionals, or support groups? What might happen if they don't get the help they need?
- "Mama still has the melancholy. But she tries hard to combat the storm-surge purple-black. She looks for the right sprinkle of sunshine to help dispel the fogs. It isn't easy. She doesn't always succeed." Why do you think rescuing Bertie made Mama “want to fight again”? (p. 282)
- Everyone has mental health. What helps Louisa June maintain her mental health? What strategies do you use or know about that help maintain and enhance good mental health?

ACTIVITIES

Wellness Stars

Though much danger lurks in the ocean and bay, vivid imagery of “stars in the waves” recurs throughout *Louisa June and the Nazis in the Waves*, with Louisa June thinking about how “something beautiful and mystical, something uplifting, floated there.” (p. 80) Use the ideas below to encourage discussion of what students think “stars in the waves” could mean as it relates to their own wellness and have them turn their ideas into unique works of art.

Talk first about the characters in the book and their “stars in the waves.” What beauty do they find in life? What lifts them up?

- Signs of depression
- Things our community needs to understand depression
- How to help a friend who is depressed

Display posters and share videos in class or as public service announcements during school announcements or assemblies as part of [Mental Health Awareness Month](#).

Resources:

- Child Mind Institute: [How to Support a Friend With Mental Health Challenges](#)
- Mayo Clinic: [Depression: Supporting a Family Member or Friend](#)
- MentalHealth.gov: [Talk About Mental Health: For Friends and Family Members](#)
- National Institute of Mental Health: [Teen Depression: More Than Just Moodiness](#)

MORE RESOURCES

Visit author [L.M. Elliott’s website](#) for more historical facts and resources related to [Louisa June and the Nazis in the Waves](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

L. M. ELLIOTT was an award-winning magazine journalist in Washington, D.C., before becoming a *New York Times* bestselling author of historical and biographical novels. Her books explore a variety of eras (the Italian Renaissance, the American Revolutionary War, WWII, and the Cold War), and are written for a variety of ages. Many of her works have been named NCSS/CBC Notables (National Council of Social Studies and Children’s Book Council), Bank Street College Best Books, Jefferson Cup Honor Books, Kirkus Bests, and Grateful American Book Prize winners. She is a lifelong Virginian and history-lover.



RACHAEL WALKER (belleofthebook.com) developed this guide. She consults on a wide variety of educational programs and multimedia projects, and develops educational materials and reading resources for children, parents, and teachers.