

## Book Club Discussion Guide



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# A Soft Place to Land

By Janae Marks

## About the author:

Janae Marks is the author of critically acclaimed middle grade novels, *From the Desk of Zoe Washington* and *A Soft Place to Land*, as well as the forthcoming novel *On Air with Zoe Washington*. She has an MFA in Writing for Children from The New School, and lives in Connecticut with her husband, daughter and miniature schnauzer named Cookie.

Janae is part of the Renegades of Middle Grade and is a co-founder of Middle Ground Book Fest.

Source: Author's website: (<http://www.janaemarks.com/>)

## About this book:

Joy Taylor has always believed home is the house she lived in her entire life. But then her dad lost his job, and suddenly, home became a tiny apartment with thin walls, shared bedrooms, and a place for tense arguments between Mom and Dad.

Hardest of all, Joy doesn't have her music to escape through anymore. Without enough funds, her dreams of becoming a great pianist—and one day, a film score composer—have been put on hold.

One bright light comes in the form of her friendly new neighbor, Nora. When she learns about Joy's need to get away sometimes, Nora lets Joy in on the complex's

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best-kept secret: the Hideout, a cozy refuge that only the kids know about. And it's in this little hideaway that Joy starts exchanging messages on the wall with another kid in the building who also seems to be struggling, until—abruptly, they stop writing back. Joy can't shake the feeling that someone might be in trouble. She has to find out who this mystery writer is, fast, but between managing a new dog-walking business with Nora, keeping on a brave face for her little sister, and worrying about her parents' marriage, Joy isn't sure how to keep her own head above water.

Source: Author's website: (<http://www.janaemarks.com/>)

### Discussion Questions:

1. HOME: When Joy moves to a new neighborhood, she sorely misses her old stomping grounds. Joy laments “how different everything is now” (p. 85). What does she miss about her old home? What is different about her new living situation? How has home been redefined for her now that she is living in an apartment building? What struggles with home does Joy have, of which her parents may possibly be unaware? Lastly, how have Joy's views of what home encompasses shifted from the beginning to the end of the book?
2. NEIGHBORS AS COMMUNITY: Joy is welcomed by a kind community that exists in her apartment building. How does Joy experience neighborliness in her new home? How has Joy's family benefitted from having a new community of neighbors around them, despite changes in their own family dynamic? When Joy is in a dire situation after losing Ziggy, how do her neighbors pitch in to help? What do you think it means that even people she hasn't “met before, but only seen around the building a few times” (p. 226) are willing to assist?
3. FRIENDSHIP: Joy experiences feelings of significant loss and sadness when she moves to her new apartment building, but she gains a new group of friends. First, Nora befriends her and introduces her to the other kids her age in the building. Joy

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expresses, “. . . I miss the feeling of home. I belonged there. I’m not sure I’ll ever belong here” (p. 86). How do these friendships as a whole and individually help Joy to know that she “belongs” in her new home? How do these new friendships build confidence and stability in Joy?

4. **THE HIDEOUT:** Joy is introduced to “the Hideout” by her new friend Nora. What is the number one rule for the Hideout, a secret place “just for the kids in the building” (p. 51)? What does the Hideout represent for Joy? What symbolism does it carry for Nora, and perhaps their other friends in the building? When the Hideout is accidentally discovered, Joy declares, “It’s official. The Hideout is closed” (p. 171). What loss does this symbolize? How is “Home Base” (p. 278), a new reiteration of the Hideout, symbolic of the growth and transition Joy and her friends experience?
5. **INNOVATION:** Though Joy finds herself in a time of unwanted transition, she does not let this stop her from dreaming and creating pathways for her ideas. How does Joy demonstrate entrepreneurial savviness? What ideas does she execute with help from the adults around her? Furthermore, how is she a thoughtful risk-taker? How does she use her ideas to ultimately reach her goals and strengthen the friendships around her? How do her ideas and decisions foster and preserve her relationships with friends and neighbors in her building?

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