

Discussion Guide — Charles Mandrake and the Resonance Array — Fireside Version

Spoilers permitted. This guide assumes the reader has finished the book. ## A note from Anna (how to use this guide)

If you're reading this with friends or family, you don't need a plan.

This guide is here to give you a place to start, and then to get out of your way. Use one question, use ten, or use none at all. Pick an opener and see where it takes you. If a question doesn't fit your group, skip it. If a moment from the book keeps coming up, stay with it.

Some of these questions point at East Bay and the life we understood before the observatory. Some point at Skelderheim and the life we had to learn fast. You can keep those worlds separate, or you can compare them. Either way is fine.

If the conversation drifts into your own lives, let it. That's where most of the good answers are.

And if you don't agree with each other, that's fine too. Just stay kind. We had to. - Anna Ko

About the Book (back cover blurb)

Charles Mandrake arrives in East Bay, Maine, expecting routine and quiet. The old observatory on his property isn't quiet. It's locked, wired, and still set up for work that has nothing to do with stargazing. The notes inside read like a procedure. The numbers read like a combination. The warnings read like someone who already learned what happens when you rush.

With Anna Ko and Todd Baskerville, Charles restores the system step by step. They document settings, rebuild what's broken, and learn that the observatory responds in repeatable ways. The mount returns to north. The pilot lamp won't go dark. The generator's load settles into the floor like a signal. The town tells them to leave it alone. They don't. Gracie Pibbles adds what her father left behind and confirms the part no one in East Bay wants to say out loud: the machine was meant to open a gate.

When the portal finally holds, it opens onto Skelderheim.

Skelderheim is a harbor city built in rings under a dim sun. It runs on curfews, seals, dues, and the unspoken rule that strangers do not survive long without a local's protection. The trio arrives with no coin, no language, and no context for the city's fear. People read Anna's face like a story they already know, and that belief turns into danger fast. They learn to move like messengers, to keep their questions small, and to listen when competent people tell them which streets to avoid.

They also learn that Skelderheim has its own kinds of order. Work can be fair if the numbers are right. Kindness can be real even when it's quiet. A bowl on a mantle and a candle lit without a name can mean more than a public promise. Emera shelters them when she has reasons not to.

Sella gives Todd a place on the docks and a name he didn't know he needed. A librarian tells them what fear did to the city and what it still does when it remembers.

Myles Pibbles's story stops being a mystery and becomes a choice with consequences. He didn't vanish by accident. He took responsibility for what he built and paid for it in years. The gate "reads" the person stepping through. It can deny passage. It can strand someone on the wrong side. It can force a decision before anyone feels ready.

By the end, Anna is no longer only Anna. She is named. She is recognized. She learns that authority can arrive before understanding and that restraint can be the only safe use of power. Back in East Bay, her father's fear turns into a rule at the threshold: no one comes through but Anna and her friends. The worlds remain connected, but not at peace.

Whatever Myles built was never meant to look into the heavens.

It was meant to look somewhere else.

Themes (focus)

This guide centers on two themes that can carry a full session (or a full unit):

1. **Choices and Morality**
2. **Faith and Beliefs**

Discussion Questions

Opener Questions (general)

1. What is the most important choice a character makes in this book, and what moral rule do you think they were trying to follow in that moment?
2. When the story presents “procedure” (steps, logs, rules, limits), does following it feel like responsibility or like surrendering judgment? Where is the line?
3. Which character’s sense of right and wrong changes the most from the beginning to the end, and what forces that change?
4. The book puts ordinary life (routine, work, town opinion) next to the unknown. When does caution become wisdom, and when does it become fear?
5. Name a moment where someone acts without complete proof. In your view, is that faith, recklessness, hope, or discipline?
6. The story repeatedly asks people to decide what they believe about something they can’t fully explain. What do you consider a fair standard for belief: evidence, experience, trust, or necessity?
7. Several choices in the book involve protecting someone. When does protection become control, and how should a group decide who gets final say?
8. The characters inherit other people’s stories (town legends, rules, warnings, roles). In your life, what “inherited belief” has been hardest to examine or outgrow?
9. The book suggests that moral choices often have costs that don’t show up right away. What kind of cost feels most real to you: time, relationships, safety, reputation, or conscience?
10. By the end, what do you think the book is asking the reader to value most: truth, loyalty, duty, mercy, or safety? Why?

Choices and Morality

East Bay (Ch. 1–10, 25)

- **Chapter 1: East Bay** — Finch gives Charles tools “for the observatory,” framing them as more valuable than money. What moral obligation (if any) does Charles take on by accepting them, and how should that shape what he chooses to do next?
- **Chapter 2: Anna** — Anna deliberately avoids Pier Street Market gossip and pays cash, even when the town runs on tabs and talk. Is that self-protection, distrust, or integrity—and what does it cost her to live that way?
- **Chapter 3: Observatory** — After reading Myles’s letter, Anna says the work must be treated like a promise, not a puzzle. What specific boundaries does that create for what they’re allowed to do, and where would breaking them feel “justified”?
- **Chapter 4: The Trip to Boothbay Harbor** — Gracie lends them Skelderheim II–VI on trust and asks to be kept informed. What ethical responsibilities come with accepting that trust, and what would count as a betrayal even if their intentions stay good?
- **Chapter 5: After Hours** — Gracie gives Todd a spare key and later puts his name into a power-of-attorney plan. Where is the line between earned trust and unfair burden, and what does Todd owe (or not owe) in return?

- **Chapter 6: The First Attempt** — After three successful openings (and learning the “three per day” limit), they choose to shut down and return to normal life. In that moment, what is the morally responsible choice: push harder while you have momentum, or stop because the system is dangerous and not understood?
- **Chapter 7: Two Tries** — Charles promised a third attempt, then decides not to use it. Is that restraint a moral choice (protecting people), a strategic choice (protecting the last chance), or a fear response—and which is most justified given what they’ve seen?
- **Chapter 8: Crab Cakes, Lobster and Friendship** — Charles admits he stayed in East Bay by not getting on the plane and building a “tour/non-profit” justification to win permission. Is that an ethical lie, a necessary survival choice, or the first honest act he’s made for himself?
- **Chapter 9: The Thing** — After repeated unstable portals, they choose to wait for Gracie instead of spending the next attempt. What do they owe to caution versus progress when the stakes are unknown but the opportunity window is limited?
- **Chapter 10: True North** — Gracie chooses to stay behind to run the panel even though the portal finally stabilizes and her father may be visible on the other side. Is that choice driven by duty, fear of losing control of the system, or love—and which motive makes it the most “right”?
- **Chapter 25: The First Order** — Anna’s father takes down a service rifle and declares that no one comes out of the portal but Anna and her friends. Given what they know and don’t know, is that a morally responsible boundary—or the start of fear-driven harm disguised as protection?

Skelderheim (Ch. 11–25)

- **Chapter 11: Skelderheim** — Todd secretly keeps Finch’s military knife on his person without telling Anna or Charles. In a situation where danger is unknown, is hiding a weapon a responsible safeguard or a breach of trust that could make things worse?
- **Chapter 12: Coffee Run** — Charles tells Anna to stay in the room while he and Todd go out into the city. Where is the ethical line between protecting someone and limiting their agency when the risk is real but not fully understood?
- **Chapter 13: The Exchange Market** — Charles asks Anna to keep her hood up and positions the trio to reduce attention on her in public. When does “protecting her” become controlling her, and how should they decide who gets final say when safety and agency conflict?
- **Chapter 14: What Fear Remembers** — The librarian describes Skelderheim using “human shields” and then living with the consequences for centuries. What does the chapter argue about collective moral responsibility—can a city “pay back” a wrong, or does it only learn to live with it?
- **Chapter 15: Transformations** — Anna accepts the tavern women’s help (hair down, Haan clothes) to avoid being mistaken for a feared figure. Is changing herself to reduce others’ fear a responsible adaptation, or is it an unfair moral burden placed on the innocent?
- **Chapter 16: Faith and Choice** — Emera admits she felt fear when she saw Anna, then chose to feed and shelter the trio anyway. What moral rule is Emera actually following, and what does it require her to risk (or refuse) in order to stay consistent?

- **Chapter 17: Dockwork** — Todd imagines a life in Skelderheim that fits him—work, coin, Sella, belonging—then decides he won’t disappear while Anna and Charles are still exposed. Is that loyalty a moral obligation, a personal identity choice, or a practical calculation about survival?
- **Chapter 18: By the Numbers** — Charles finds the city’s error and advises Brell to correct it without accusations so the collector can “save face.” Is avoiding blame the ethical move here, or does it enable a system that will keep harming people unless confronted?
- **Chapter 19: Anna, The Keeper of the Flame** — When the Veil restrains Charles and Todd, Anna has to decide whether her words are a “wish” or a “command.” What makes it morally right (or risky) for her to claim authority she doesn’t understand in order to protect her friends?
- **Chapter 20: Myles’s Choice and Consequences** — Myles throws the quartz through the gate to prevent pursuit, knowing it strands him on the wrong side. Is self-sacrifice the ethical choice here, or does it create a new kind of harm by abandoning the people who need him elsewhere?
- **Chapter 21: Shops and Soup** — Izrah strikes the boy who whistles at Anna and uses visible threat to “train the street.” Is that a justified protection tactic in a dangerous city, or does it cross a moral line by normalizing fear as a tool?
- **Chapter 22: Charles and Myles** — Myles says he chose the work over time with Gracie and would make the same choice again because it saved lives. What moral framework makes that choice acceptable, and what would have to be true for it to become unforgivable?
- **Chapter 23: Farewell at the Inn** — Izrah uses Veil authority to remove city dues from the inn and put it into the historians’ rolls, turning private kindness into public protection. When is using power this way morally right, and when does it become coercion—even if it helps?
- **Chapter 24: The Gate** — The second “combination” is described as being in the heart of the person stepping through, and the gate can deny passage based on purpose. Is it morally defensible for a system to judge someone’s intent and assign consequences, or should judgment always remain human?

Faith and Beliefs

East Bay (Ch. 1–10, 25)

- **Chapter 1: East Bay** — Anna insists they document switch/dial positions and restore everything “as it was,” while the town’s instinct is “leave it alone.” What does each side believe they’re protecting, and which belief is actually stronger in this chapter?
- **Chapter 2: Anna** — Anna grew up with local legend about the observatory (light in the sky, a sound like a storm, Pibbles gone). How do inherited stories like that shape what she treats as “possible,” even before she sees proof?
- **Chapter 3: Observatory** — The journal frames the machine as a portal and gives rules (two combinations, “do not anchor across the rim,” secrecy, patience). At what point do the three move from skepticism to belief—and what exactly causes the switch?

- **Chapter 4: The Trip to Boothbay Harbor** — Gracie treats “don’t anchor across the rim” as an unbreakable rule based on her father’s near-miss, and the numbers station becomes a new kind of authority. What do the characters decide to *believe* before they can prove it, and why?
- **Chapter 5: After Hours** — Todd’s method is built on procedure: writing it twice, leaving a trail, making the work followable. Is that discipline a form of belief—faith that systems can protect fairness—and how does the chapter argue for or against that belief?
- **Chapter 6: The First Attempt** — After the portal shows a living city, the trio can no longer treat this as theory. What is the exact moment belief becomes unavoidable—and does that shift come from evidence, experience, or something like need?
- **Chapter 7: Two Tries** — They follow the procedure exactly, yet the portal won’t hold. When a system responds but refuses to cooperate, what do the characters choose to believe: that the method is incomplete, that the environment is wrong, or that someone (Myles) withheld a key step?
- **Chapter 8: Crab Cakes, Lobster and Friendship** — Anna and Todd describe East Bay as a place where routines and small acts of care create trust, while Charles describes a life built on schedules without belonging. What does each character *believe* makes a life “real,” and how does that belief steer their choices around the observatory?
- **Chapter 9: The Thing** — Gracie’s “Stay there until I get there” lands like authority without explanation. Why do the three accept that directive immediately—evidence, relationship trust, fear, or hope—and what does that reveal about what they believe matters most right now?
- **Chapter 10: True North** — The breakthrough comes from treating “true north” as literal and correcting magnetic declination. What does this chapter suggest about belief in methods—when does careful procedure become a kind of faith, and when does it need intuition to fill gaps?
- **Chapter 25: The First Order** — Anna makes a “first order” that her parents are her parents, then accepts a revealed name and purpose as Zaaya-Kai / Orra-Kai. What kind of belief is she choosing here—identity, duty, faith, or survival—and what does she give up (or gain) by making it binding?

Skelderheim (Ch. 11–25)

- **Chapter 11: Skelderheim** — People react to Anna as if she belongs to a feared story (“ghosts”), and the mural reinforces it. How do other people’s beliefs force the trio to change their behavior, and what belief do they adopt about Anna’s visibility by the end of the chapter?
- **Chapter 12: Coffee Run** — Klebber and Burgh both offer rules, warnings, and quiet guidance (curfew, careful questions, the library). Why do Charles and Todd accept these constraints so quickly—evidence, instinct, trust in competence, or fear—and what belief about Skelderheim forms from that?
- **Chapter 13: The Exchange Market** — The trio quickly treats Skelderheim’s routines (patrol cadence, seals, curfew warnings, “look like messengers”) as reliable truth. What do they believe about this city by the end of the chapter—and how much of that belief is evidence versus instinct?

- **Chapter 14: What Fear Remembers** — The librarian says the Daughters believed fear could teach faster than regret, and the city now believes lamps and bells keep history “carryable.” Which belief feels more persuasive in this chapter, and why?
- **Chapter 15: Transformations** — Anna experiences a moment of belonging after being dressed and welcomed, even in a city that feared her face earlier. What does the chapter suggest about belief in identity—does belonging come from who you are, how you appear, or how others choose to see you?
- **Chapter 16: Faith and Choice** — Emera says, “in this house, we choose what to believe,” and judges by actions over stories. How does that kind of faith differ from the city’s fear-based “belief,” and what does it demand from Anna as she’s being named by strangers?
- **Chapter 17: Dockwork** — On the docks, Todd is renamed “Bjorn,” paid fairly, and treated as valuable for what he is. How does that experience reshape what he believes about his own worth—and does that belief strengthen his commitment to his friends, or quietly compete with it?
- **Chapter 18: By the Numbers** — The chapter repeats the idea that “numbers are numbers,” and the table method brings order and relief. What does Charles’s relationship to numbers reveal about belief in proof and procedure—and where does trust (in Brell, in the city, in the trio) still matter even when the math is correct?
- **Chapter 19: Anna, The Keeper of the Flame** — The dockmen believe Anna is the Orren-kai returned and treat that belief as grounds for violence. How does a community’s belief become “truth” in practice, and what does the chapter suggest is the only reliable way to challenge it?
- **Chapter 20: Myles’s Choice and Consequences** — The gate “reads” Myles and refuses him passage. What does Myles choose to believe about the system after that—fate, design, moral judgment, or mathematics—and how does that belief shape the rest of his life?
- **Chapter 21: Shops and Soup** — Anna sees that some people fear the Orren-kai, while others greet the idea with joy and hope. What does this chapter suggest faith actually is in Skelderheim: superstition, memory, gratitude, a survival strategy, or a moral commitment?
- **Chapter 22: Charles and Myles** — Myles frames the core question as “what are you willing to buy with your hours,” and argues that drifting is its own cost. What does Charles come to believe about freedom and responsibility in this chapter, and how does that belief challenge the life his parents designed for him?
- **Chapter 23: Farewell at the Inn** — Emera describes quiet practices (a bowl on the mantle, a candle lit without a name) and says she “felt” who Anna was before proof. What kind of faith is this—tradition, instinct, gratitude, fear, or something else—and why does it hold up under real risk?
- **Chapter 24: The Gate** — Myles says the gate opens only when hearts are “true,” and warns that if they can’t align, it will send them somewhere else. What do the three need to believe about themselves, each other, and their purpose for “true” to mean anything in practice?