

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE ANTIHERO:

Why We Root for the Person We Would Condemn

FAMILY DISCUSSION GUIDE

Use this guide with any antihero story you are watching together, best suited to older kids and teens. The goal is not to judge the character. It is to notice how the story keeps us on their side, and to tell understanding a person apart from admiring one.



DR. Z TAKEAWAY

The antihero works because we quietly excuse them, and those excuses look a lot like the ones people use for their own wrongdoing.

So the most useful question after one of these stories is not whether you liked the character. It is what the story did to keep you on their side, and whether you still knew, the whole time, that they were doing wrong.



1

BEFORE WATCHING

Set the stage and open hearts and minds.

- Everyone name a character you liked even though they did some bad things. What made you like them?
- Guess out loud: is this someone the story wants us to admire, or someone it wants us to understand while still knowing they are doing wrong?



2

WHILE WATCHING

Notice how the story keeps you on their side.

- When you catch yourself rooting for them, say so, and try to name what just won you over: their skill, their charm, a worse enemy, a person they love.
- Watch for the moment you start making excuses for something they did. What was the excuse?
- If the character hurts someone, notice whether the story lets you feel it, or hurries you past it.



3

AFTER WATCHING

Reflect together and make meaning.

- Did you still like them by the end? What did they do that you would condemn in real life?
- Where was the line for you, the thing that finally felt like too much? Was it the same for everyone?
- Did understanding why they did it ever tip over into thinking it was okay? How could you tell?



4

FAMILY REFLECTION

Go deeper with empathy, honesty, and connection.

- We all contain parts of ourselves we would rather not admit. Talk about why it can feel good to watch a character act on the things the rest of us hold back.
- Name the difference, in your own words, between understanding a person and admiring them.
- Try this: notice the reasons we use to excuse a character we like. Those are often the same reasons people use to excuse themselves.



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Connection heals. Conversations help.

