*Trouble* – Discussion Questions

1. “Is it possible for everything to change, and for nothing to change?” (p.14) How does everything—and nothing— change for Henry and the Smith family? Have you ever had a moment that felt like it could define your family from than on? How difficult is it to define yourself after an event like this?
2. Discuss Henry’s relationship with his parents and siblings. How does the accident complicate them? Would you consider Henry and Louisa close? Do you think Henry was close to his brother, despite his cruelty sometimes? How do each of them react to the tragedy?
3. What does the arrival of Black Dog do for Henry and his family? How important are pets in your own life? What purpose do they serve people? How do people serve animals?
4. Compare Blythbury-by-the-Sea to the town of Merton. How do these two places complicate the tragedy? Do you think that people would have felt as strongly about pressing charges if Chay had been a typical kid from Longfellow Prep?  Should Chay have been charged with leaving the scene of an accident or not? Why?
5. After a storm, Henry and his mother discover a wreck in Salvage Cove. Why do people take such an interest in ship wrecks? What does Henry eventually discover about the ship and come to realize about his family and Trouble?
6. Why do you think the author decided to tell Chay’s story at the end of chapters? How does it add to the conflict and suspense of the novel? How long did it take you, as a reader, to develop empathy for Chay? Why?
7. Why does Henry decide to climb Mt. Katahdin? Is he trying to prove something? Why is Mt. Katahdin so important to him? If you could do one last thing with someone you lost what would it be? What happens en route to the mountain?
8. How are the acts against the Chouans regarded by the community? Why is the arsonist considered a hero who served justice? Do you agree? Why do you think the two communities dislike each other so much?
9. What does Chay know about his own parentage? How does it change everything for him? His parents expected disappointment because of it. Does that make disappointment inevitable? Are family secrets ever justifiable?
10. Describe the Cape Ann Coastal Invitational. How does Henry perform during it? Why? Do you think he deserves to be dropped from his position on the team or not? Would you be able to concentrate under similar circumstances?
11. Discuss Henry’s friendship with Sanborn. How does Sanborn prove his loyalty to Henry? Is the way the two boys tease and thump on each other typical of their age and sex? Do you think male friendships are quite different from female ones? How?
12. Discuss the following quote: “There was no need for any words. A heart that has lost knows every other heart that has lost. Late and soon, loss is all the same.” (p. 221)  Do people who have suffered a great loss have an affinity? What other things do you think people recognize in each other?
13. The privacy of family is weighed against the public right to know. Who has jurisdiction for the truth of public events? How is this issue of public knowledge and privacy rights revealed in the tragedy, the shipwreck, and the arson? How do you think it would feel to have the public looking in on your family’s private matters?
14. As the novel unfolds, the reader learns not only Henry’s story but also the stories of Chay, his family, Sanborn, and Louisa. Do you think everyone has a story that makes him or her sympathetic? Why do you think the author decided to tell Chay’s story as well as Henry’s?
15. Explain Chay’s reaction to any police officer. Is this because of the guilt he feels  for his previous acts, or because of his past in Cambodia, or simply the result of him being a minority in this country? Do you fear or try to ignore the police in your community?
16. What happened to Chay and his family in Cambodia? How did they survive the ordeal? Does it remind you of any other historical or contemporary atrocities? What can be done to help displaced families?
17. Describe what happens between the boys and the fishermen in the diner and out in the woods. Do you think the racism Chay faces is typical? How open to immigrants is your community? What happens to Henry?
18. What revelations are made about Chay, the accident, and the wreckage in Salvage Cove? Which one surprised you most as a reader?
19. In the end Henry decides, “The world is Trouble . . . and Grace. That is all there is.” (p. 331) Do you agree? What does he mean by this? What are examples of trouble and grace in your own life?