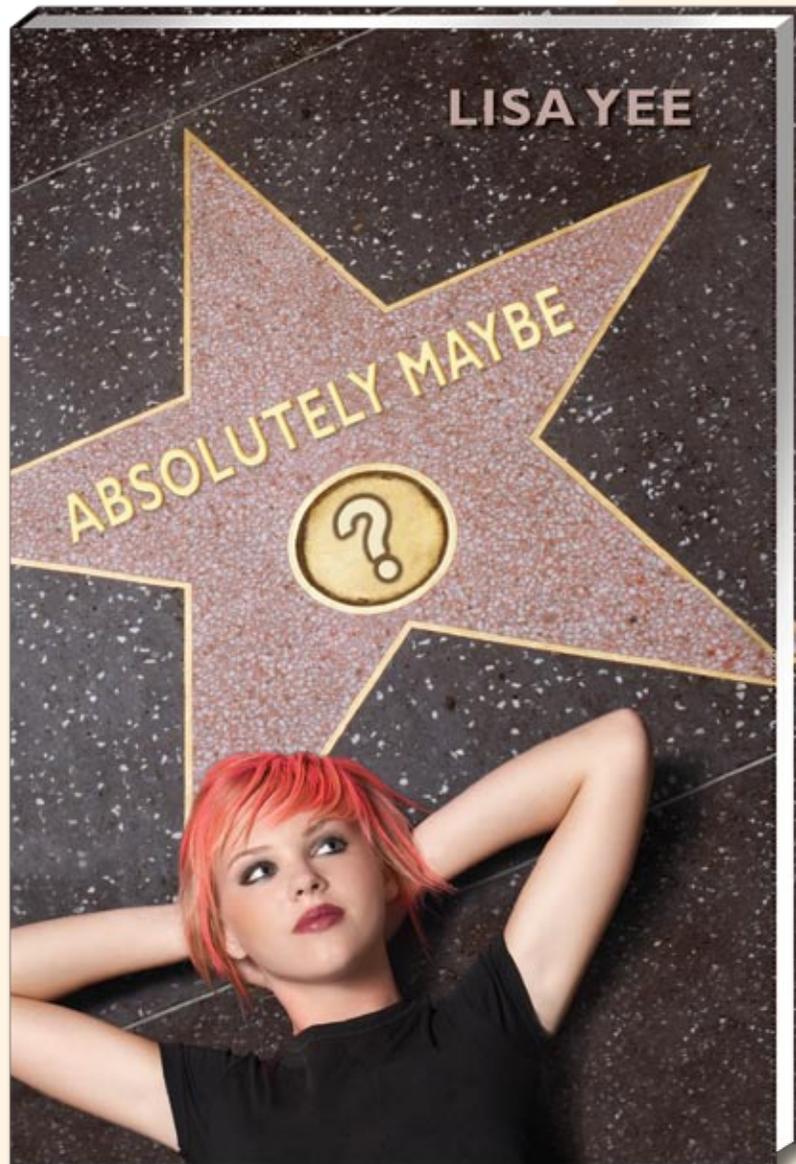


DISCUSSION GUIDE



Maybelline “Maybe” Chestnut doesn’t know her biological father. She lives in Kissimmee, Florida, with her former beauty queen mother, Chessy, who drinks too much. Maybe despises Chessy’s sleazeball boyfriend, Jake, and is dismayed when her mother announces she is getting married for the seventh time. When Jake tries to molest Maybe and her mother refuses to take her side, Maybe sets off with her two best friends to Los Angeles, where she believes her biological father lives.

There Maybe meets Sammy, one of her mother’s ex-husbands, and the only former stepfather close to Maybe’s heart; he is the one Chessy married twice. Sammy welcomes Maybe with open arms, and together they work through their feelings about Maybe’s alcoholic mother.

Maybe finds comfort in Sammy’s house and a sense of purpose with her new job working as a cook and cashier in a taco stand with her new friend, Jess. She locates her real father, and confronts the man she never knew. In the end, Maybe renegotiates her relationship with her mother, with the support of Sammy, her adoptive father.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Ask students to write down the definition of oxymoron. Then have them discuss possible meanings for the phrase “absolutely maybe.” What inferences can they make from the title? What predictions can they make about the story? In what situations would they use the phrase?

THEMES

Several themes are prevalent in this story: self-perception, identity, belonging, relationships, and coming-of-age. Maybe’s changing hairstyles and her change in clothing speak to a change in her identity and her self-perception. How so? Another theme in the story is unrequited love. Compare and contrast the relationships between Sammy and Chessy and Sammy and Willow.

SETTING

A story can often have many settings, and each setting can create a different mood or atmosphere. Setting can also help an author define characters. The rooms in Sammy’s house are filled with photos, many of Maybe and her mother. When Willow takes Maybe to the spare bedroom, a room bathed in pink with a canopy bed, a white lace bedspread, and purple pillows, Maybe is stunned. Willow remarks, “It’s freakin’ weird, isn’t it?” (p. 106) What does the house reveal about Sammy? Find another setting in the story. What does this setting reveal about a character? What mood does it create?

MAIN CHARACTERS

Absolutely Maybe is written from a first-person point of view. We learn about each character through the thoughts, behaviors, and words of Maybe, the protagonist. What do the passages below reveal about each character? What do they reveal about Maybe’s feelings?

CHESSY

I love it at Ted’s house. Everyone there is normal. No one wears a crown and Ted’s mom is never “on.” (p. 11)

MAYBE

Upstairs I stare into the mirror. I do look like a monster. My makeup is smudged, and the orange from my hair is dripping down my forehead. I wash everything off. My face looks blank without makeup, like nobody’s home. I reapply my kohl eyeliner and deep purple lipstick, then change into a fresh black T-shirt. (p. 11)

HOLLYWOOD

“I am happy,” Hollywood says unconvincingly. “I don’t know. I’ve never been out of Florida, and now I’m driving across the country to a place I’ve never been to before? I may never see you two again.” He looks right at me when he says this. (p. 28)

TED

“I don’t know what you’re getting so hissy about,” he [Ted] says, running to catch up with me. “You should be thanking me for stopping your crime spree. It’s a quick way to land in jail.” (p. 73)

SAMMY

Sammy looks surprised that his wine glass is empty. The waiter materializes and offers him a second glass. Sammy waves him away. “Your mother,” he says, carefully selecting his words, “can be intoxicating. When she pays attention to you, you feel like the most important person in the world.” (p. 154)

JESS

“This may sound weird, but I was so much happier before I knew Princeton wanted me.” (p. 233)

FORESHADOWING

Authors drop hints or clues called foreshadowing that set the stage for the outcomes of the story. Authors may foreshadow through dialogue, description, attitudes, and/or character reactions. Foreshadowing is an important literary device, for it helps the author set up story events and bring closure to the story's conflict. For instance, Maybe mentions that Jake is creepy and never takes his eyes off the girls (p. 18). Shortly thereafter, he attacks Maybe. Look back through the story for other clues that predict other story outcomes. For example, what clues hint to: Hollywood's documentary about Maybe? Ted's decision to return home to his family? Chessy's arrival in L.A.? Ted's interest in Hollywood? Sammy's lingering affection for Chessy?

HUMOR

Absolutely Maybe addresses serious real-life issues, yet humor abounds throughout the novel. By lacing humor through stories with serious issues, writers can lighten the tone, preventing the story from being melodramatic or too dark—in essence, relieving tension. A term often used for this technique is comic relief. Lisa Yee makes good use of humor. Find examples and explain how they elevate a scene or a character. How would the tone of the scene be different without humor? How different would your reactions to the characters be without humor?

CONFLICT

Both internal and external conflict are central to the story, and much conflict centers around the influence Chessy has on those around her and/or the wake she leaves behind.

Maybe struggles with her feelings for her mother and her biological father.

- How was she able to leave her mother? She buys a plane ticket for her mother in the end. Why? How was she able to reconcile her feelings for her mother?
- Why do you think she refuses to take the DNA test her father asks her to take?

Maybe also struggles with her self-perception; however, in L.A. she begins developing a more positive image of herself.

- What factors/influences contributed to her lack of confidence in Florida, and what factors helped her think more positively about herself in L.A.?

We know less about Chessy's internal struggles, but we know she is an alcoholic.

- What do you think accounts for her obsession with beauty pageants? What accounts for her multiple marriages? And for her criticism of Maybe?
- What does the brief flashback to a visit from Maybe's grandmother reveal?
- She has been married to Sammy twice. Do you get the sense she really cares for him? Why or why not?

Sammy has his own demons. When Maybe arrives in his home, she finds pictures of her mother covering every wall.

- How have Sammy's feelings for Maybe's mother changed over the years? How have his feelings for Maybe changed?
- Why does he remove the pictures?
- Willow physically resembles Chessy. Is the resemblance a coincidence? Why or why not?

Jess is a lesser character in the story, but she has conflicts as well.

- Jess is accepted into Princeton University. Do you think she will go? Why or why not? What clues can you find in the story that support your answer?

DISCUSSION

1. Compare and contrast Maybe and her mother Chessy. Is Maybe's physical appearance retaliation against her mother? Why or why not?
2. Maybe is bullied mercilessly at school. When she is attacked, why does she refuse to identify her attackers?
3. Maybe spends a great deal of time at Ted's house. She sleeps over and eats dinner there. Why does she stay with Ted? How is his lifestyle similar to or different from Maybe's?
4. A road trip is a common literary device. Writers frequently use it to frame a coming-of-age story. Maybe, Ted, and Hollywood set out for Los Angeles in Hollywood's beat-up Toyota. Along the way, the three stop several times. In what way is the road trip a coming-of-age experience for all three teens?
5. A homeless woman, who goes by the name of Audrey Hepburn, plays a minor role in the story. Explain her significance.
6. While Maybe has had a hard life living with her mother and is in many ways mature for her years, she is also naïve. Identify a scene that illustrates her inexperience.
7. Maybe has never been interested in Hollywood as a boyfriend, and yet, when Jess is attracted to him, Maybe seems jealous. Why do you think she feels this way?
8. Describe Sammy's relationship with Willow. Is Willow a likable character? Why or why not?
9. Compare and contrast Willow and Chessy.
10. Where do you see the central characters of the story in five years? On what do you base your beliefs?
11. Can you draw parallels between Maybe and any other character you have read about? If so, whom and why?
12. Is Chessy vulnerable? Why or why not?
13. How do you believe the relationship between Maybe and Chessy will evolve? On what do you base your beliefs?

OTHER BOOKS TO COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Becoming Chloe by Catherine Ryan Hyde

The Big Wander by Will Hobbs

The Blue Mirror by Kathe Koja

Bud, Not Buddy by Christopher Paul Curtis

Derby Girl by Shauna Cross

Echo by Francesca Lia Block

Finding Daddy by Louise Plummer

The Girls by Amy Goldman Koss

Gingerbread, by Rachel Cohn

Harley, Like a Person by Cat Bauer

In the Space Left Behind by Joan Ackermann

Keeping the Moon by Sarah Dessen

Lush by Natasha Friend

Missing Pieces by Norma Fox Mazer

The Moonlight Man by Paula Fox

Penny from Heaven by Jennifer L. Holm

A Room on Lorelei Street by Mary E. Pearson

Runner by Carl Deuker

The Same Stuff as Stars by Katherine Paterson

Up Country by Alden Carter

You Don't Know Me by David Klass



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Yee was born and raised near Los Angeles and grew up loving to read. She attended the University of Southern California, where she majored in English and Humanities. Lisa has been an associate director of a creative think tank and co-owner and creative director of Magic Pencil Studios, a strategic creative company. She has written and directed creative projects for Fortune 500 clients and led creativity seminars. Yee's novel *Millicent Min, Girl Genius* was the winner of the prestigious Sid Fleischman Humor Award; her second novel, *Stanford Wong Flunks Big-Time*, won the Chinese American Librarian Association Best Book of the Year Award and was named an ALA Notable Book. Her other novels include *So Totally Emily Ebers* and *Absolutely Maybe*. Lisa lives in South Pasadena, California, with her husband, Scott, and her two children, Benny and Kait.

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

Can you talk about the genesis of *Absolutely Maybe*? Why did you want to write the book?

It began with a title, Charm School Dropout. I was curious about what it would be like to be the goth-ish tomboy daughter of a diva-esque ex-beauty queen. But as I started writing, the story evolved and became more complex and deeper in scope than I had first anticipated. It also changed from a lighter, middle-grade novel to a darker, though still humorous, YA novel. Having written middle-grade novels before, it was quite liberating to write without constraints. I have a teenaged daughter and while working on *Absolutely Maybe*, I kept her in mind as my reader.

How did the character of Maybe develop? Did she evolve as you developed the story or was she clear in the beginning?

Maybe, who's named after Maybelline cosmetics, came to me all at once. I really felt like I knew her, though she did reveal herself even more as I began writing. She presents such a hard exterior, but inside she's still very much a little girl looking for love and stability. I always write my endings first, so I knew where I was going. Only, I wasn't sure how I'd get there. But because Maybe was such a strong presence, I let her take the lead and show me the way.

What was the most difficult part (or character) in the story to write and why?

It was hard to write Chessy, Maybe's mom, because she makes so many bad choices. She hurts Maybe repeatedly and appears to be the total opposite of her daughter. Yet there had to be something redeeming about her to make Maybe's feelings about her mother so strong and conflicted. Chessy was also very over-the-top in her beauty-queen way, yet I knew I also had to make her vulnerable and sympathetic to round her out.

What themes in the story do you hope resonate the most with teens and why?

When I begin writing, I always assign a word to my main character. It reminds me of who they are and what they are looking for. With Maybe, her word was aimless. As the story began, she was sort of meandering and, even though she didn't realize it, she was looking for her identity. Maybe had an inner strength that she was not aware of. She had the ability to affect other people's lives for the better, but couldn't see it. Many teens doubt themselves. They underestimate their power, but it's there. It's there.

Which character do you like the best in the story and why? Which do you like the least?

I absolutely love Ted. OMG, he was soooooo fun to write. I had to be careful, though, or else he would have run away with the book. I'd sit and laugh out loud whenever I was writing scenes he was in. But like with all outrageous characters, I knew that Ted probably was very introspective too. Sometimes bravado can hide something. And it was wonderful leaving clues about the real Ted. As for the character I liked the least, I think that would be Gunnar. The way he treated Maybe was awful, but she had to meet him in order to move on with the rest of her life. The way he was, and their meeting, also put her relationship with her mother into perspective.

BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR

Millicent Min, Girl Genius

2003

Hardcover 0-439-42519-0 \$16.95

Paperback 0-439-42520-4 \$5.99

Stanford Wong Flunks Big-Time

2005

Hardcover 0-439-62247-6 \$16.99

Paperback 0-439-62248-4 \$5.99

So Totally Emily Ebers

2007

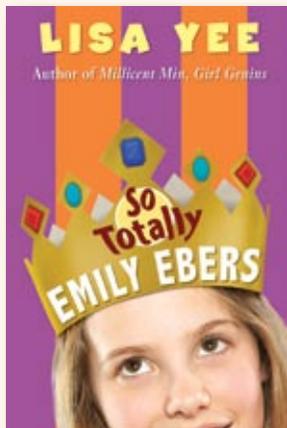
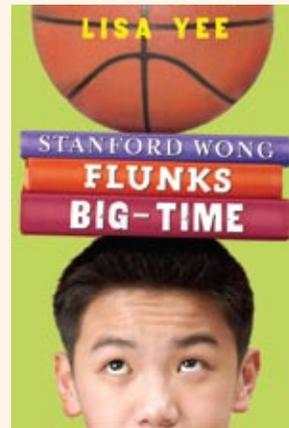
Hardcover 0-439-83847-9 \$16.99

Paperback 0-439-83848-7 \$5.99

Absolutely Maybe

2009

Hardcover 0-439-83844-4 \$16.99



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<http://www.1800runaway.org/>

<http://www.homeless.org.au/runaways.htm>

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Toll-Free Telephone Ordering and Customer Service: **1-800-SCHOLASTIC (1-800-724-6527)**
Fax orders toll-free to: **1-800-560-6815**



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LEVINE BOOKS

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