

DISCUSSION GUIDE



THINGS THAT SURPRISE YOU BY Jennifer Maschari

EMILY MURPHY IS ABOUT TO enter middle school. She's sort of excited . . . though not nearly as much as her best friend, Hazel, who is ready for *everything* to be new. Emily wishes she and Hazel could just continue on as they always have, being the biggest fans ever of the Unicorn Chronicles, making up dance moves, and getting their regular order at the Slice.

But things are changing. At home, Emily and her mom are learning to move on after her parents' divorce. Hardest of all, her beloved sister, Mina, has been in a treatment facility to deal with her

anorexia. Emily is eager to have Mina back home but anxious about her sister getting sick again.

Hazel is changing, too. She has new friends from the field hockey team, is starting to wear makeup, and has crushes on boys. Emily is trying to keep up, but she keeps doing and saying the wrong things. She wants to be the perfect new Em. But who is that really?

This bighearted, poignant novel about the often shifting bonds of family and friendship will resonate with readers navigating the uncharted waters of growing up.

“Engaging and believably realistic, effectively combining both harrowing challenges and the support of caring individuals . . . a fine read.” —Kirkus Reviews

“By learning to accept the good with the challenging, Emily navigates her way to reassuring friends and adults. Her relationship with her sister is particularly poignant. Readers will relate to Emily’s growing pains and the rewards of finding positive support.” —School Library Journal

The Common Core State Standards addressed by the discussion questions and activities in this guide are noted throughout. For more information on the Common Core, visit corestandards.org.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



Unless otherwise noted, all discussion questions align with the following Common Core State Standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.1

- The novel begins in the main character, Emily's, bedroom. Emily is busy crafting a costume when her friend Hazel arrives. What important information about Emily and Hazel is revealed in the first scene in the story? How are the girls alike? How are they different?
- Emily and Hazel share a love for the Unicorn Chronicles books. The two have been eagerly awaiting the release of the next novel in the series. What conversations and events before and at the bookstore make Emily feel unsettled?
- The growing differences between Emily and Hazel become even more apparent when the two head to the pizza parlor after the bookstore. Describe Hazel's new friends from the field hockey team and how they treat Emily.
- The first day of school can be exciting and scary. What happens during Emily's first day of middle school and how does she react to the newness of people and classes?
- One night Emily finds herself unable to fall asleep, so she decides to watch TV and have a bowl of cereal. Why does the infomercial by Dr. Henry Franklinton-Morehouse spark Emily's interest?
- Following the instructions in the *Be the Best You* CD set, Emily makes a chart with two categories: "Emily Before" and "Emily After." What information does Emily put in the "Before" category? How does she describe who she is as she enters sixth grade? What does she put in the "After" column? Who does she want to be?
- What special talent did Emily discover she had when she was at the bowling alley and met up with Anita and Hector? What is Anita's idea to help Emily share her talent at middle school?
- How does the puzzle that Emily and her mother are working on inspire Hector to choose a topic for the movement project he and Emily must do for class?
- Emily's mother and father are recently divorced and Emily is still navigating this big change in her life. Describe Emily's relationship with her father. How does it change over the course of the novel? Why does Emily's reaction to her dad buying a puzzle for them to do together at his house trigger an important conversation between Emily and her dad?
- Emily forms a strong connection with her language arts teacher, Ms. Arnold. In what ways is Ms. Arnold helpful to Emily as she adjusts to life in middle school and changing friendships? What is the Bagel Bunch and how do Emily's feelings toward this group change over time?
- Mina's struggles are both a secret and very public. What behaviors of Mina's lead her parents to seek treatment for her? How are some of these behaviors still an issue when Mina returns home?
- Emily misses her old relationship with Mina and is thrilled to have Mina's help as she prepares for school picture day. What happens with Mina that reminds Emily of how complicated Mina's issues are? How does Emily feel when Mina can't help her get ready?
- In what ways do Hazel and her field hockey friends change Emily's longtime plan for seeing the Unicorn Chronicles movie? Describe the night at the theater. What choices do Hazel and Emily make and how do these choices help to define their characters?
- Contrast the difference between how Anita and Sara support Emily on the disastrous school picture day and how Hazel and her teammates treat Emily at the movie theater.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.3

- How does Mina respond when Emily calls her from the movie theater? Is Mina a good big sister to Emily? How does being Emily's sister help Mina?



- Why do you think that Emily didn't shame Hazel when Hazel appeared crying at Emily's house toward the end of the novel?
- Describe Hector. Does he change over the course of the novel? How do Emily's feelings about herself affect how she feels about having a friendship with Hector?
- What lessons do you think Emily learned through all of her difficulties and discoveries in the novel?

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.2

ACTIVITIES

Noun, Singular

At the beginning of the novel, Emily buys a set of self-improvement CDs. Dr. Henry Franklinton-Morehouse's CDs are full of advice and exercises to help a listener become "a better you." One exercise is to "write down a definition—just like in the dictionary. Define who this new YOU would be." Emily creates a dictionary definition of herself as the person she would like to become. Choose another character from *Things That Surprise You*. Write a dictionary definition of this character. Include at least five ways to describe him or her that reflect who the character is—on the inside as well as the outside.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.1

Helpful Hints

Moving from elementary to middle school marks a big change in a student's life. Emily and Hazel react differently to the transition to middle school, and Emily, in particular, finds the change difficult. Think about Emily's experiences in middle school—from lockers and cliques, to classes and clubs, to lunch room politics—and the lessons Emily learns from each new experience. Use this information to create a Survival Guide for Middle School. What tips would you include for students to help them successfully adapt to middle school? Write your guide in the form of a pamphlet or brochure. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.1

I See You

Significant social changes are a part of middle school. People are often judged on how they dress or by what others say about them. Emily's classmate, Hector, is referred to as Soap Boy by Hazel and her new group of friends. This description and their attitude toward Hector makes Emily wary of interacting with him at school. Imagine what Hector's impression of Emily is when he first meets her at the bookstore and then sees her later in their language arts class. Write a description of Emily from Hector's point of view. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.6; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.3

Lights, Camera, Action!

Emily is obsessed with the Unicorn Chronicles book series and is excited to see the movie based on one of the books. Imagine that *Things That Surprise You* is destined for the big screen. What information from the story would be included on the poster advertising the movie? What would the slogan for the movie be? What story information would the illustration include? What actors might star in the movie version of the novel? Create a movie poster for *Things That Surprise You* that includes all of this information. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.1



The discussion questions and activities in this guide were created by Leigh Courtney, Ph.D. She teaches in the Global Education program at a public school in San Diego, California. She holds both masters' and doctoral degrees in education, with an emphasis on curriculum and instruction.

NAME: _____

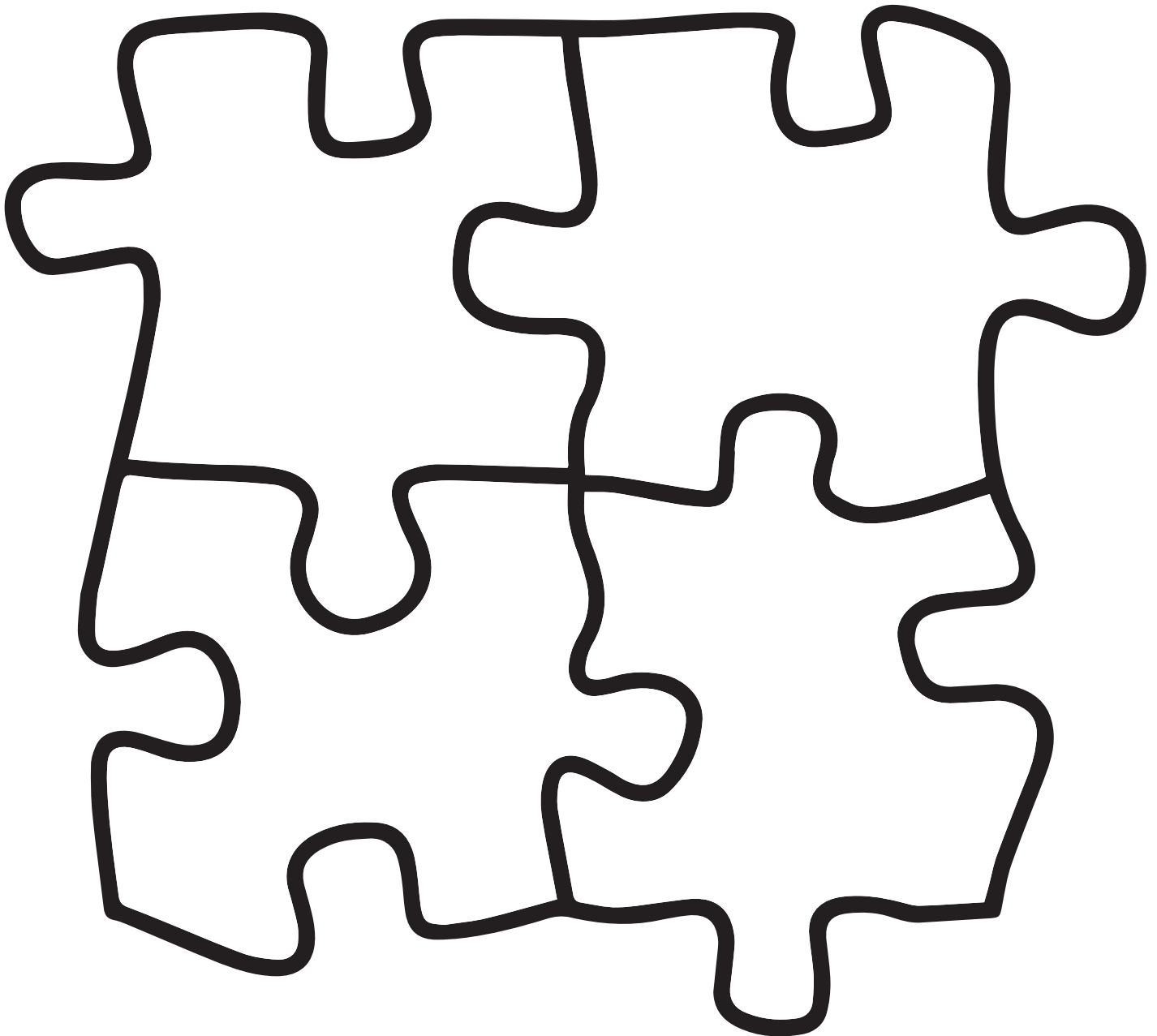


THE PIECES OF EMILY

Emily's mom pulls out a jigsaw puzzle for the two of them to complete. Hector and Emily focus their language arts project on the movement of the tectonic plates that jigsaw the Earth's crust together. Puzzles and how things fit together are a theme in *Things That Surprise You*. Select four important scenes from the novel that fit together to define Emily's character. Draw a picture and write a caption for each scene in the puzzle pieces below.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.1

Emily



NAME: _____

PUNCTUATION DAY



Ms. Arnold, Emily's awesome language arts teacher, assigns her class a punctuation assignment. She asks her students to choose a type of punctuation that best describes them as people. What would an exclamation mark say about a person's personality? A question mark? Think about the personalities of the characters listed below and choose a type of punctuation that best represents each. Include reasons for your choices of punctuation.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.3

Hazel	PUNCTUATION: _____ REASON FOR CHOICE: _____ _____
Mina	PUNCTUATION: _____ REASON FOR CHOICE: _____ _____
Hector	PUNCTUATION: _____ REASON FOR CHOICE: _____ _____
Lucy	PUNCTUATION: _____ REASON FOR CHOICE: _____ _____
Anita	PUNCTUATION: _____ REASON FOR CHOICE: _____ _____
Emily's dad	PUNCTUATION: _____ REASON FOR CHOICE: _____ _____
Emily's mom	PUNCTUATION: _____ REASON FOR CHOICE: _____ _____

NAME: _____



GROWTH AND CHANGE

The theme of change is strongly woven throughout *Things That Surprise You*. Over the course of the novel, most of the characters experience challenges and issues that alter the way they feel and behave. Complete the chart below to show how these characters change from the beginning of the novel to the end. Use examples from the novel to support your descriptions of these characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.3

Character	Beginning of the novel	End of the novel
Emily		
Hazel		
Mina		
Emily's father		