

DISCUSSION GUIDE

to the middle-grade novels of

AMY SARIG KING

Ages 8–12
Grades 3–7





Me and Marvin Gardens

ABOUT THE BOOK: Obe Devlin has problems. His family's farmland has been taken over by developers to be turned into subdivisions. His best friend Tommy has abandoned him, and he keeps getting nosebleeds. As he cleans up trash at the nearby creek, he discovers a strange creature who eats plastic and poops toxic waste. The animal—Marvin Gardens—becomes Obe's best friend and biggest secret. But to keep him safe from the developers and Tommy and his friends, Obe must make a decision that might change everything.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the epigraph from writer Marcel Proust and how it applies to Obe and his experiences. How does he take a “voyage of discovery”? In what way does he end up having “new eyes”?
2. What is the significance of the book title? How does it relate to the story? What role does Monopoly play throughout the book? Talk about the format of the chapter titles and the similarity of the opening lines of each chapter. Why do you think the author made those choices? How do the small illustrations relate to Monopoly?
3. Describe Marvin Gardens, his physical characteristics, and how he interacts with Obe. Why does Obe like him so much? Find scenes that illustrate the animal's personality. What are some of Obe's fears about Marvin Gardens, and why is he reluctant to let other people know about or meet him? What do you think the future holds for Marvin Gardens and his family?
4. What kind of person is Obe? What makes him feel different from other kids? How does his view of himself change in the course of the novel? What brings about the changes? Discuss his observation in chapter 28 that “people are really weird. They just think you should be like them, pretty much.” (p. 140)
5. Compare Obe's parents. When does his mother act “like a Devlin” and what does that mean? Why does his father's speech sound like “blah blah blah”? Discuss his father's view of gender roles as described by Obe: “He told me more than once that boys should be fearless, daring, and brave.” (p. 64) Why does he tell Obe that boys shouldn't cry? How do his father's expectations affect Obe? How does Obe feel about his parents?
6. Describe Bernadette, her interests, and her relationship with Obe. What does he like about her? How is she different from Tommy's sister? At what points during the story do the siblings seem especially close, and why?
7. What is Annie like and what's she interested in? Discuss her family situation and why her parents are so protective. Why does Obe think Annie is a great friend for him? What do you think Annie will be like when she grows up?
8. Talk about how Tommy's friends treat Annie. Why does Tommy kiss her? Discuss how Annie reacts to the kiss. What do Obe and Bernadette think about the kiss and the kiss list? Compare that to what their parents think. How does the school punish Tommy and the other boys? What's your view on the kiss, the list, and the punishment?
9. What are the ways in which Tommy changed before the events in the book begin? Contrast how he used to act with Obe to how he acts in most of the novel. Why do you think he changed? What effect does it have on Obe? Discuss the possible future of the friendship, if any, using evidence from the story.
10. Violence is a thread that runs through the story in the past and present, including what Obe calls the turf wars. Talk about the turf wars and other examples of violence, and why they occur. What are Obe's views about violence?
11. Obe feels overwhelmed by environmental problems and statistics. Why do you think Ms. G makes sure her students know about alarming environmental issues? How does Obe do his part to improve the environment? Discuss Ms. G and her role in the plot.

ACTIVITIES

1. Chapter 7 opens, “There was greed. There had always been greed. Greed pretty much ruined everything fun and good in the world. Maybe that's a negative attitude. But my science teacher, Ms. G, says the reason we have so much pollution is greed.” (p. 28) Write an essay reacting to these sentences. Do you see greed in the world, and where? Provide examples of greed from what you have studied about the past. How might pollution be tied to greed?
2. Among the things that Bernadette explains to Obe is the concept of irony. Discuss irony as a class and then either individually or in groups, come up with examples of irony from your own imaginations or from books and other people. Create a classroom chart of examples of irony that starts with ones from the novel and continues with examples that students add.
3. At the back of the book is a list of websites. Discuss how to evaluate a website: What organization or person created it? For what audience and purpose? What range of topics does it cover? What special features like videos does it offer? Either individually or in small groups, examine one website. Prepare a report about what you found and how helpful you think the website is.
4. Obe reflects on the Devlin farmland in chapter 10, “There were turf wars, over and over again on these acres.” Based on the information and detail that Obe provides about the different groups and people who have lived on or owned the land where he lives, including the Lenape, do research on the area where you live and its history. Do you think that Obe has a special claim to the place he lived? Have other people who have lived on the land had special claim to it?



The Year We Fell From Space

ABOUT THE BOOK: Twelve-year-old Liberty Johansen's parents are divorcing, and her father is in freefall—suffering from depression, refusing help. She's worried she's going to follow his same path and doesn't know what the divorce means for her relationship with either of her parents. Her little sister won't go outside. The other kids in middle school are obsessed with fake weddings and boyfriends, but Liberty Johansen is going to change the way we look at the night sky. Most people see the old constellations, the things they've been told to see. But Liberty sees new patterns, pictures, and possibilities. With everything that's happening, Liberty feels like her whole world is falling from space. Can she map a new life for herself and her family before they spin too far out of reach?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe Liberty's personality and the situation with her family. How does she feel about her parents' separation? Talk about the role of the star maps in her life, how the separation affects them, and how she tries to bargain with the stars. Discuss her first name and why she calls herself an "amateur creative astronomer."
2. Liberty identifies with the planet of Mars, which glows faintly red, and associates Jilly with the planet Venus, which is sometimes near Mars. After explaining this, Liberty goes on, "I don't know what I'm so angry about." (p. 19) Her anger comes up many times in the novel. Review some of those times and discuss why she's so angry and how she expresses it.
3. Jilly, as the planet comparison suggests, is much different in some ways than Liberty. Describe Jilly and talk about why she won't go outside early in the story. Identify some of the differences between her and Liberty. In what ways are they similar? What do they share that helps them get along with each other?
4. When Liberty talks about her father's depression in chapter 7, she says that adults don't talk to kids about topics such as depression for fear that kids will worry. Discuss her observation that, "Of course, we worry anyway, so it's better that we know." (p. 28) Why else are her parents secretive about her father's depression and about their separation?
5. Describe Liberty's father and what his relationship with Liberty used to be like. How does he act after he moves out? Why? What role does his mental health play in his actions? Discuss how his relationship with his children changes throughout the novel. Compare his relationship with his children to how their mother interacts with them. Describe their mother's personality and how she is reacting to the divorce.
6. Liberty worries that she will be like her father, who she describes as "irrational." Why does she use that word? Why is she worried? Do you think she has good reason to be concerned? What do her mother and therapist say about her worries?
7. One of the most powerful images that Liberty sees in the sky are the new constellations that lead her to say, "I am the broom. I am the explosion. I am the frying pan." (p. 93) How does she analyze these images in terms of her own feelings and behavior? Find places in the story where she refers back to the images and explain why.
8. What role does the meteorite play? Why does Liberty want it to be a secret? Why does she talk to it? How do you interpret the fact that it seems to answer her? The title recurs as a phrase throughout the story—how does that relate to the meteorite, and what does that phrase mean to Liberty?
9. It takes a while until the reader learns what happened with Leah's ring. Before the narrative explained that Liberty found it on the floor, what did you think had happened? Do you think her reasons for not telling anyone make sense? Why does she decide to try to give it back to Leah? Why do you think Leah is so unfriendly to Liberty?
10. What does Liberty think of Tiffany when she first meets her? Why does she feel the way she does? Explain how Liberty's view of Tiffany changes and what the change is based on. What are your impressions of Tiffany after having read the whole book?
11. Explain what is going on in Finn's life at home. How is it similar to Liberty's situation? How is it different? Why do you think he uses the word feminist as an insult? Discuss his brother Patrick's remark to Jilly, "Everyone knows a family needs a man." (p. 41) Talk about the changes in the relationship between Liberty and Finn throughout the book.

ACTIVITIES

1. The book opens with quotations from writer Jack London and artist Max Ernst. How do each contribute to your understanding of the story? What do you think makes a great astronomer? If there was a book about you, what quotation or quotations—from an important figure, a book, a song, or some other source—would shine light on your story?
2. Liberty draws a star map each day—how do you think that helps her? How does it inform what she's thinking about and what's happening in her life? Explore the website <https://in-the-sky.org/skymap2.php> and see how the stars appear where you are today and how that changes at other times and in other locations. Create your own star map by unclicking the constellation boxes and downloading a map that you can print or modify on your device. What new constellations or patterns do you see? Write a story or create an image based on what you find.
3. Writers often use physical objects to tell the reader something important. Liberty has a special connection with the meteorite, and we find out a lot about how she's feeling, what she's thinking, and what she cares about through that object. Write a journal entry or a short story about an object—real or imagined—that would reveal something about you, including a conversation you might have with that object.
4. What do you think about the book's cover? How does it relate to and reflect the story? Do you think it is effective? If you were creating a new cover for this book, what would you include? Create your own cover—paint, draw, or use pictures you find to come up with a cover image, and don't forget the title and author name. Do you want to include a quotation about the book? Do some research here (<https://www.panmacmillan.com/blog/june-2015/the-beauty-of-the-book-an-homage-to-book-cover-finishes>) and think about what effects you would want for your cover (foil, spot UV, matte, etc.).



Praise for *Me and Marvin Gardens*

A Spring 2017 Kid's Indie Next List selection
A Washington Post Best Book of the Year
A New York Public Library Best Book for Kids
A Chicago Public Library Best Book of the Year
A Texas Bluebonnet Master List selection

★ “A provocative exploration of human action and interaction on both local and global levels, as well as the interplay between past, present, and future, King’s novel will leave readers pondering how we treat each other and the planet.”
—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

★ “A smart, environmentally conscious underdog story with a lot of heart. . . . The characters are rewardingly complex. Through Obe, King asks the Big Questions alongside the smaller, more personal ones in a way that will likely have readers doing the same.”
—*The Horn Book Magazine*, starred review

★ “A coming-of-age novel with a fully developed and authentic protagonist. An emotionally rich read for a wide audience, especially those interested in keeping the planet alive and well for future generations.”
—*School Library Journal*, starred review

“Mystical, fablelike . . . just right for a sensitive sixth-grader with a growing self- and world awareness trying to navigate the troubled waters of uncertain friendships and demeaning bullying. A finely wrought, magical coming-of-age tale with a convincing message.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*

“This is acclaimed YA author King’s first foray into middle-grade territory, and it’s no surprise that she adeptly handles issues like bullying, compromised friendship, complex family dynamics, and the tedium of homework . . . Drawing upon the tradition of Carl Hiaasen’s *Hoot* (2002), this eco-focused story will tug at readers’ consciences and heartstrings.”
—*Booklist*

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Paperback: 9780545870764 (\$7.99)

Also Available as an Ebook and Audiobook



Praise for *The Year We Fell From Space*

★ “As always, the author’s sensitivity to her characters’ situational challenges is stunningly, compassionately insightful—and her narrative voice and just-this-side-of-realism setting uniquely her own.”
—*The Horn Book*, starred review

★ “This is required reading for both children and parents of divorce, all of whom will find themselves reflected in this heartachingly cathartic tale of family, mental health, and coping.”
—*Booklist*, starred review

★ “Liberty is an unusual and interesting protagonist, and her comfort with being a bit odd is refreshing as she stays true to herself even when facing rejection by her peers. Her anger and her sadness are thoughtfully explored, and the book wisely addresses the difference between short-term and long-term depression without taking away from the human story. Offer this spaced-out selection to readers who often feel out of place themselves.”
—*The Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books*, starred review

“Acclaimed as a YA novelist (*Dig*, 2019, etc.), King pens a middle-grade book that will especially resonate with readers confronting or affected by family turmoil. Quietly compelling.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*

“This title will resonate with middle graders searching for deeper understanding of their own or their family’s experiences with these or similar topics.”
—*School Library Journal*

“Recommended for anyone—young or older—who is going through these kinds of issues or knows someone who is. Lovely and heartfelt.”
—*New York Journal of Books*

“I could not put this book down. I read it from two perspectives: that of a child whose parents divorced, and that of a parent of a small child. Both perspectives gutted me, in the best possible way. King is a force to be reckoned with.”
—Jaime Herndon, *BookRiot*

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Also Available as an Ebook and Audiobook



Photo credit Krista Schumow

About the Author

Amy Sarig King is the author of *Me and Marvin Gardens*, a *Washington Post* Best Book of the Year. She has also published many critically acclaimed young adult novels under the name A. S. King, including *Please Ignore Vera Dietz*, which was named a Michael L. Printz Honor Book, and *Ask the Passengers*, which won the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. After many years farming abroad, she now lives back in southeastern Pennsylvania, with her family. Visit her website at www.as-king.com and follow her on Twitter at @AS_King.

About the writer of this guide

Kathleen Odean, a school librarian for more than fifteen years, gives professional development workshops on new books for children and teens. She chaired the 2002 Newbery Award Committee and served on earlier Caldecott and Newbery Award Committees.