



## BOOK IN REVIEW: A TEACHING GUIDE

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# Trying to Find Themselves:

Teen Literary Characters in Search of Identity and the Right Paths

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As *The ALAN Review* “Book in Review” inaugural columnist, S. d. Collins, passes the baton on to me, I feel as though I’m in the midst of a fast race to the finish line with swift delivery persons leaving boxes of books just ahead of my path and coming up hard on my heels. There are so many enticing YA books to read and so many books upon which to reflect. I’ve enjoyed the books and issues my column predecessor has highlighted in previous issues of the journal, and I am delighted to have the chance to share my thoughts on some books that offer value for today’s English language arts classrooms.

As I sorted through the many young adult literature titles I’ve read recently in preparation for the column, I kept identifying and then discarding themes. What should the focus of the column be? There are so many important issues in the world, so which ones should I highlight through books for teens? Should I adhere to *TAR*’s suggested theme about partnerships within and across schools and communities, or should I play the rebel and launch in my own direction? As I contemplated all of this and was overwhelmed by the choices spread out before me, I realized that like many teens, mine was a column in search of an identity. The problem was that I had too many identities and too many directions in which to turn. Ah, perhaps *that* should be the focus. Perhaps I should choose two

books dealing with identity but also tangentially related to teens involved in changing the world around them—through partnerships with classmates in their immediate school community or even through removing themselves from that community briefly.

Even as adults, many of us struggle with identity issues. Who am I? Where do I fit in? How can I make my mark on the world and leave it changed by my presence? These are queries commonly posed by teens today. Sometimes identities are so interwoven with the fabric of the questioner’s own family that it is almost impossible to separate what the teen wants from what his/her parents or guardians want. At other times, involvement in a romantic relationship has a dark side, hinting at the possible disappearance of one of the partners, subsumed into the relationship itself or the expectations of the beloved one. Through all this self-reflection lurks the consideration of how to be true to oneself while also pleasing others.

This issue’s “Book in Review” column explores two books by two different authors. *The Kidney Hypothetical or How to Ruin Your Life in Seven Days* by Lisa Yee (2015) examines how trying to adhere to the expectations of others can lead to veering so far off track from your own goals and ambitions that you don’t even recognize who you are, where you’re going, or how you got there. The other book, *We Can Work It Out* by Elizabeth Eulberg (2015), offers a rollercoaster ride through the life of a girl who has decided not to waste time getting the boy but instead focuses on making the world better for herself and those around her—and then what happens to those plans when she still gets the boy. Both books clearly have

common themes, including journeys of self-discovery and empowerment and taking action to change the world around you, even in some small way. Change must begin with each of us before we can start to move on to larger, systemic alterations.

## About the Authors

Lisa Yee, a Chinese American writer born and raised near Los Angeles, California, is best known for her middle grade books, *Millicent Min*, *Girl Genius* (2003), *Stanford Wong Flunks Big Time* (2005), and *So Totally Emily Ebers* (2008). She is debuting in the YA market with *The Kidney Hypothetical or How to Ruin Your Life in Seven Days*, an intriguing YA title that explores possibilities about the way life opens up when one refuses to accept the path laid out by others. While it's possible that Yee drew inspiration for her protagonist from her own time as a member of her high school debate team and president of her high school honor society, she claims that the story was informed by her own daughter's experience with a water tower and law enforcement officials. The author has also been an inventor, jingles writer, and employee at Walt Disney World.

The other author, Elizabeth Eulberg, has been a prolific YA author since her first book, *The Lonely Hearts Club*, was published in 2009. It was followed by *Prom & Prejudice* (2011), *Take a Bow* (2012), *Revenge of the Girl with the Great Personality* (2013), *Better off Friends* (2014), and *We Can Work It Out* (2015). Born in a small Wisconsin town to a mother who was a teacher who became a stay-at-home mom until her children entered school and then became a librarian, and a father who was the owner of a clothing store that has been in the family since 1929, she grew up loving to travel, read, and listen to music, passions that remain with her still and are woven into the fabric of her books.

You can learn more about these authors on their websites at <http://www.lisayee.com/> and <http://www.elizabetheulberg.com/>.

## About the Books

### *The Kidney Hypothetical*

We've all known someone like Higgs Boson Bing, the protagonist in *The Kidney Hypothetical or How to Ruin Your Life in Seven Days*. Anticipating college at

Harvard after a wildly successful high school career, Bing considers himself to be the king of the world, or at least his small fiefdom. His father has plans for Bing to join his successful dental practice as he moves through college just as successfully as he matriculated through high school. Although Bing doesn't realize it, this is neither the life he wants nor the path he needs to follow. With a week remaining in his stellar high school career, the senior blows everything and, in doing so, perhaps saves himself. On the senior cruise around the bay near his school, Sally Ride High School, he responds honestly and negatively to a hypothetical question about whether he'd donate a kidney to his long-time girlfriend. His honesty has unexpected results: Roo immediately breaks up with him, and he is saddled with the moniker of Dinky Dick when he arrives back on campus. Suddenly, he becomes the laughing stock on campus, and he realizes that he may be well known but isn't particularly well liked.

As Bing reflects on how things have gone wrong, he realizes that his life has been a series of lies and that he's been living someone else's life. Because his older brother Jeffrey died before fulfilling his family's expectations, Higgs has been following in his brother's footsteps. Over the next seven days, he engages in a soul-searching process that leads to acts of rebellious liberation; he faces several fears with the help of Monarch, a girl who assists with his questioning and psychological makeover. Yee deftly tackles several tough issues, including loss, expectations, family dynamics, imperfections, and social pecking orders, all with empathy and humor. Several evocative passages show clearly Higgs's fondness for his garden and working with his hands, and readers will realize long before he does that perhaps dentistry is not the right career for him.

### *We Can Work It Out*

With chapter titles and lyrics from well-known Beatles songs serving as pitch-perfect epigrams detailing the misadventures of Penny Lane Bloom, this book, the follow-up to the author's earlier *The Lonely Hearts*

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*Club*, examines another teen's attempts to find herself while maneuvering through the high school social pecking order. Junior Penny Lane [yes, she was named after *that* song] continues to nurture her female empowerment club while trying to balance a romantic relationship herself. Although Penny knows she doesn't need a boyfriend to feel good about herself, she also enjoys spending time with

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the kind and supportive Ryan who might be the most patient guy in the world. Even though Ryan seems to come last on his girlfriend's list of priorities, he still loves her because she is so involved in self-empowerment causes and eschews the typical high school drama. As the novel's protagonist deals

with homework, school dances, the prom, club meetings, and a dance-a-thon to raise scholarship money, she vacillates among various conceptions of what she really wants with and from Ryan.

Amid hilarious scenes featuring her Beatles-loving parents and some of her less supportive classmates who offer verbal abuse and ridicule, Penny Lane remains true to her purposes and is reminded that relationships, in whatever form they may appear, matter and reveal a great deal about each of us. Teen girls especially would benefit from reading this book and its predecessor as a reminder that one's identity does not depend upon a romantic relationship. After all, while some relationships are worth the hard work, others are not, and having a boyfriend is not a prerequisite for graduating from high school. No one needs to give up parts of him/herself in order to please someone else.

## Using the Books in the Classroom

### Pre-reading Activities

Since to some extent, neither Higgs Boson Bing in *The Kidney Hypothetical* nor Penny Lane Bloom in *We Can Work It Out* chooses to be defined by the expectations of others in their lives—in his case, the expectations of his father, and hers, and her reduced expectations of her boyfriend's best friend and some of her other nay-

saying classmates—it might be useful to make a list of what others expect from you. Next make another list of your expectations for yourself. Then compare the two lists. Imagine whom and where you will be in 10 years, 25, 50. Sketch out a roadmap of your life from right now to right then.

Popular culture plays an important role in both books. To set the mood for *We Can Work It Out*, search for CDs of the music played by the Beatles. Additionally, in order to understand Penny Lane's parents better, listen to some clips of the music of the Beatles from YouTube, in particular "Penny Lane," which is about a place, not a person, but still offers clues to her parents' Beatles obsession: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZBcJGphTEE>. As you listen, pay attention to the lyrics to determine why Penny Lane's parents were so fond of the song that they chose to name their daughter in its honor. Then, go online again to view images of the real Penny Lane in Liverpool, England. After finding at least five different links to the street that inspired the song, decide for yourself what makes the place so special now. Now that you've savored some Beatles and UK ambiance, take photos of a place that is special to you. Use those photos to create a physical scrapbook or a cyber scrapbook with the help of Smilebox at <http://www.smilebox.com/>.

The author opens *The Kidney Hypothetical* with Higgs leaning out over the prow of a ship in Leonardo DiCaprio style from the blockbuster movie, *The Titanic*. Watch the "I'm the King of the World" scene that sets the tone for the film and this book: <http://www.imdb.com/video/imdb/vi2676989977/>. After viewing the clip, write a three-minute reaction to what you just saw. How does the character feel? How does his reaction make you feel? What reasons might the author have for beginning his book with a reenactment of the famous scene?

Higgs can trace the unraveling of his life to one event: the moment during the senior class sailing trip when he gave an honest response to the hypothetical question of whether or not he would give up a kidney for his girlfriend, Roo. Although he surely knows better than to respond honestly and not give the expected response, for some reason, he chooses the truth. Havoc results with Roo breaking up with him and most of the other females allying with her. From there, things only get worse for Higgs. With this fictional situation

in mind, free-write a response to this question: How do you respond to hypothetical questions? Are they meant to be taken seriously? Do our responses really reveal what we'd actually do when faced with the hypothetical situation for real, or are they simply another way to be dishonest or inauthentic?

### Interdisciplinary Connections

In *The Kidney Hypothetical*, Higgs loves gardening. He spends hours nurturing the plants that will bear fruit and then carefully harvesting the produce. Once he brings the crops back into the house, he cleans what he has gathered, even polishing some of the fruits before giving them to his neighbors. Investigate community gardens as well as backyard gardens and identify some of the requirements necessary for his garden to thrive.

In *We Can Work It Out*, Penny Lane nurtures the self-empowering Lonely Hearts Club whose purpose is to show other teen girls that their self-esteem should not be based on males' reactions to them and that friendship between females is at least as important as having a boyfriend. During the next two weeks as you watch television programs, movies, and advertisements, explore websites and/or listen to music, then record what you notice about the relationships between males and females. After you have collected this data, create a collage made from pictures torn from magazines to represent the messages that are being sent through these venues.

### Group Discussion Questions

1. *We Can Work It Out* is told by a female narrator, while *The Kidney Hypothetical* is told by a male narrator. How might these stories differ if the genders of the narrators were different? What do readers gain and lose through the perspective that is offered in each book? How might each protagonist's parents have told their child's stories?
2. Both Penny Lane Bloom and Higgs Boson Bing clash with some of the authority figures in their lives, including the school principal. Do the two characters simply have a problem following directions, or is there something more at stake for them in these interactions?
3. In a sense, both protagonists shake up the worlds around them—Penny by organizing the Lonely Hearts Club and funding scholarships for worthy senior girls, Higgs by giving an impromptu graduation speech in which he urges his classmates to live up to their own expectations and not someone else's. Which protagonist do you think has the greatest impact on his/her audience? Why? With which protagonist do you most identify? Why?
4. Both Penny Lane and Higgs have secrets that they have not revealed to their current set of friends or to their family members. Why do you think they continue to hold onto these secrets? What would happen if the secrets were revealed?
5. It seems to be a truism that in order to get admitted to the best college, high school students like Penny Lane and Higgs must be deeply involved in school activities. After considering lists of all their accomplishments, reflect on whether it is possible to be too busy participating in extracurricular activities to have time to study or to follow other passions. As the bar for admissions to elite schools continues to rise, what advice would you give to high-achieving students such as the narrators? Why would you advise them in that way?
6. Friends are essential to both of the main characters in the two books. Why is it so hard for the friends of both Penny Lane and Higgs to tell them the truth? Why is it so hard for them to hear the truth? Why does it take someone that he has only recently met—Monarch—to help Higgs realize that he has taken the wrong path? Once Higgs learns the truth about Monarch, why is he so dismayed about her advice and guidance?
7. Consider the unique structure of each book—chapters beginning with Beatles song titles and snippets of lyrics in *We Can Work It Out*, and a daily countdown of the week before graduation from Sunday to Saturday in *The Kidney Hypothetical*. How do these frameworks help the books work? In what ways do they detract from the stories?
8. Both protagonists must speak before large groups of people on numerous occasions, sometimes without preparation. What are the most important messages they share with their audiences over the course of the book? What attracts Higgs to the debate team and Penny Lane to her Lonely Hearts Club?
9. If you were creating a playlist for one of the secondary characters in either book, what would be some essential songs that you would include? Why?

10. Both Penny Lane and Higgs have romantic interests of sorts. In what ways are those love interests supportive of and/or detrimental to their growth?
11. Compare and contrast the behaviors and expectations of the Blooms and the Bings toward their offspring and toward each other.
12. What do you think will happen next for these two adolescents, Penny Lane and Higgs, poised on the brink of the rest of their lives? Why do you think this will happen? If you could attend their ten-year high school reunions, what changes might have occurred in their lives and career paths?

### Wonderful Words Worth Noting

Both books exhibit many of the traits used by good writers. With a partner, discuss how each passage listed below makes you feel and what information it provides about the speaker. Since both books are told from the first-person point of view, the quotes allow readers to take a peek into their psyches.

#### From *The Kidney Hypothetical*

“Gossip spreads fast in high school. I would say that it spreads like wildfire, but that wouldn’t be right. It spreads faster. There’s nothing more invigorating to the student body than a good rumor, especially if it’s about someone you know.” (p. 9)

“I started to run and knocked down several students. As I stumbled, I could hear them yelling at me, only it sounded like we were underwater, and I was drowning.” (p. 112)

“I brought my bounty into the house and washed and polished each apple, each zucchini, everything, individually. Then I got out the paper bags, and when they were full, I left them at the doors of some of our neighbors. I didn’t need to leave a note, they’d know who it was from.” (p. 144)

“Outside the sunshine was blinding. It had been the longest night of my life and all I wanted to do was go home and sleep in my own bed. Nothing made sense—not that it ever did.” (p. 236)

“Today would be for my father, I had decided. But tomorrow would be for me.” (p. 266)

#### From *We Can Work It Out*

“I never thought I would regret having a boyfriend who was so generous, but it really did make it hard to compete with him.” (p. 91)

“I decided to stop pretending that I could handle it all. Because it was clear that I couldn’t. I let everything go.” (p. 113)

“One person’s humiliation was another’s source of pure joy.” (p. 145)

“I’d become hyperaware of every minute I spent with Ryan. On the outside he looked the same (except for the bruise on his face and small cut on his lip from the fight). But everything else had changed so much. I had to find one thing that was still going well for him. I had to convince myself that I hadn’t ruined his life.” (p. 162)

“What I did know is that relationships, like life, are all about balance. And that the heart really is the strongest muscle. It would heal. All it would take was time and some awesome friends by your side.” (p. 305)

Now return to both books and choose a passage that is meaningful to you. Share it with a partner and explain what it means, why it’s significant, and why it speaks to you so powerfully.

### Post-Reading Activities

Write the very next chapter in the continuation of the story of Higgs or of Penny Lane. What happens next?

Imagine that Penny Lane and Higgs meet each other after both of them head off to college. Of course, he’s a little bit older than she is, but still, they might end up running in the same circles. Craft a scene describing their first encounter. Then find a classmate with whom to perform the scene.

Since they represent graphically the relationships between individuals in a group, sociograms can be valuable in understanding group dynamics in school and in life outside the classroom. First, read a brief explanation of sociograms in “Sociograms: Mapping the Emotional Dynamics of a Classroom” at <http://www.6seconds.org/2012/05/08/sociograms-mapping-the-emotional-dynamics-of-a-classroom/>. Next, create a sociogram that indicates the relationships at work in first one and then the other book. Compare the results and draw conclusions about the importance of relationships for Penny Lane Bloom and for Higgs Boson Bing.

Both main characters have unique, ear-catching names. Discuss with a classmate the importance of one’s name. If you have a story behind your name, share it with a classmate. Then, consider the possible

impact of the characters having been christened with more common names. How might their lives have been different by that simple yet important decision?

## These Remind Me of You

The two books featured in this column are fairly different because of how empowered their protagonists are, but they aren't alone. Some additional books that might be worth a second look include the following:

Chen, J. (2008). *Girl overboard*. New York, NY: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.

Lockhart, E. (2008). *The disreputable history of Frankie Landau-Banks*. New York, NY: Hyperion Books.

Quick, M. (2010). *Sorta like a rock star*. New York, NY: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.

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