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All We Know of Love

by Nora Raleigh Baskin

*I used to think that a person would
not know who I was, not really know me,
until they heard about my mother.*

Four years, four months, and fifteen days ago, Natalie Gordon's mother walked out in mid-sentence. Now Natalie is traveling twenty-four hours on a bus to Florida to find her mother, to find herself, to find out something about love. Along the way, Natalie struggles to understand her relationship with Adam, a boy she pines for with near-obsession. And to her surprise, she meets people with stories like her own — stories about giving love and getting lost in the desire to be wanted.

Discussion Questions

About Natalie's Mother

1. Natalie presents telling details about the way her mother reacts to things and what kinds of things are important to her: "She was always telling me not to flush the toilet every time. There was no need to waste water and electricity" (page 11). What are some other instances in which we learn revealing details about Natalie's mother? Draw on those details to describe her character.
2. Why does Natalie think she is responsible for her mother's leaving? What do chocolate cookies and an old shoe box have to do with Natalie's guilt?
3. Why does the fact that Natalie's mom throws out the bag of cookies scare Natalie (page 15)? Describe the way the author presents this action.
4. Natalie talks about the times her mother practiced leaving. On pages 70–73, a young Natalie is being difficult in the grocery store, and her mother hides from her. Is this behavior abusive? What are some other times when Natalie's mother practiced leaving? Is she a sympathetic character? What might she have done differently?
5. Is Natalie responsible for her mother's leaving? Does she forgive her mother? Natalie's mother missed some of her daughter's most important developmental years. What kind of an impact has her mother's absence had on Natalie?
6. We learn late in the novel that Natalie's mother's name is Dana. Why do you think that for much of the novel we don't know her in any way except as "Natalie's mother"?
7. How does Natalie's mother react when as a young girl, Natalie shows her the picture she has drawn (pages 140–142)? What impact does Natalie's mother have on her daughter in this scene?
8. Is Natalie's mother mentally ill?



9. Why do you think the author includes the descriptive detail that Natalie’s mother always has a tissue (pages 168–169)?
10. How has Natalie’s mother changed by the end of the novel? What is the reason she gives for having left? Was her leaving justified? Could you ever leave your child? What was Natalie’s mother going to tell her daughter about love before she left?
11. What kinds of things does Natalie’s mother send to her? How is the last package different from the rest?
12. Near the end of the novel, Natalie’s mother’s penchant for eliminating waste causes her to take an action that allows Natalie to find her. Do you think she wanted Natalie to know where she was? If her action was deliberate, what took her so long?

About Natalie’s Father

1. Is Natalie’s father likable? Could he have done anything to make Natalie’s mother’s life better?
2. Describe Natalie’s relationship with her dad. What is his first name? How does he feel about the fact that his wife left him? Is he a sympathetic character?
3. How does Natalie’s relationship with her father change?

About Natalie’s Friend Sarah

1. Sarah is Natalie’s best friend. How does their friendship change in the novel? How does Sarah handle Natalie’s betrayal? Have you ever neglected a close friend for a romantic relationship? (Reread pages 109–112 as part of this discussion.)
2. Sarah and Natalie create a list of “written requirements for our true love” (pages 16–19, 30–31). What kinds of things do they include? If you were to write such a list, what would it include?
3. Who is a better student, Natalie or Sarah? Describe Sarah.
4. Natalie and Sarah are very intelligent. Is it realistic that they would have such romanticized notions about relationships? Is it believable that someone as smart as Natalie would make such bad decisions about her relationship with Adam?

5. How does Sarah react when she learns that Natalie has gone to find her mother in Florida?

About Natalie’s Boyfriend, Adam

1. How does Natalie’s decision to stop wearing a seat belt (page 76) mirror her sexual behavior with Adam? Why do you think she takes such risks? Natalie says, “I turned over my free will to Adam Fishman, and it made me feel like a precious, fragile china doll” (page 77). What are some of the ways in which she loses her identity in this relationship? Why does she act the way she does?
2. How many of the written requirements on Natalie and Sarah’s “true love” list does Adam meet? What kinds of things does Adam do that keep Natalie involved with him?
3. What is the difference between Charlene’s calling Natalie “baby” (pages 23, 37, 49) and the way Adam calls her “baby” (pages 19, 85, 87, 88)?
4. Describe Adam Fishman. What is important to him?
5. How does Adam manipulate Natalie? She knows that she is being manipulated by him, but she can’t seem to help herself. How can she be so self-aware but still have such a difficult time letting go of their relationship? What are some of the things that Adam does to Natalie that keep her coming back? Is he a bad person?
6. When does Natalie realize that Adam is a fraud? (Reread page 138.)
7. What does this quote tell us about how far Natalie has come?: “I am no longer narrating my own story and imagining Adam listening to me tell it.” (Reread page 167.)

About Natalie

1. Do you like Natalie at the beginning of the novel?
2. List five adjectives to describe Natalie.
3. How has she changed by the end of the novel?
4. What has she learned about beauty?
5. What has she learned about happiness?

6. Natalie says: “*Deserve*. Perhaps if I were given the power to delete a single word from the English language this would be the one.” Why? (Reread page 180).
7. Do you think Natalie will have a romantic relationship with Ethan?

Themes Explored

1. *All We Know of Love* opens with the main character’s looking at herself in “the scratched mirror above the tiny metal sink.” She says that seeing her blurry reflection is like “looking at myself underwater.” How do the themes of seeing yourself, seeing yourself in other people, reflection, and connection work in this novel? Mirrors appear at different points in the novel. How do they work as a symbol? Is that symbol effective as a literary device?
2. What is life like for students in Redding Ridge High School?
3. Why and when do girls start to lose their identities? How do Natalie’s descriptions of her first boyfriends show that there were differences between the way she feels about herself when she is with them and the way she feels when she is with Adam? (Reread page 42.) To Natalie, what does it feel like to be female in the world? (Reread page 121.)
4. When Natalie is with Adam at the beginning of their relationship, she goes from feeling invisible to feeling invincible. Do you think a lot of girls and women get involved with someone, especially sexually, in order to feel important?
5. What does the expression “Why buy the cow if you can get the milk for free” (page 35) mean? Is it true? How does this idea make you feel?
6. Have you ever had the experience of thinking you might be pregnant when you didn’t want to be? Have you ever had a friend who went through that experience?
7. On page 78, Natalie thinks about the euphemism “He got her in trouble.” Is biology destiny? Are women, especially young women, still much too vulnerable in relationships? For girls, what are some of the downsides of “hooking up” or being “friends with benefits”? What about for boys? What are some of the upsides?
8. Does motherhood mean a loss of identity?
9. What is the difference between an embrace and a hug? (Reread pages 18–19.)
10. Does Natalie know that she has some problems? What does she mean when she says “I am . . . working on this” (page 43)?
11. What does Charlene mean when she says, “I’ve learned to enjoy the trip” (page 45)?
12. How is the young version of Charlene like Natalie? Are there differences?
13. How do Lorraine’s story and the fifteen different Eskimo words for *snow* reflect the stories of different kinds of love (pages 63–66)?
14. Claire’s sister Lily dies. How does Claire’s mother’s reaction to the loss of her daughter contrast to what Natalie’s mother has done? Are there parallels between Claire’s situation and Natalie’s? (Reread pages 95–97.)
15. On page 151, Tevin says, “I’m cool. I don’t need nothing.” Is this true for him? Is it true for Natalie? Is it really true for anyone?
16. Why does Theresa smack Tevin (page 156)?
17. Natalie has high expectations for the role of mother. What kinds of things does she think mothers are responsible for? How does she view the role of fathers?
18. On page 100, Natalie reflects that although “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” is a nice saying, “How do you know what to do unto others when nobody’s done it unto you?” What does Natalie mean when she thinks this?
19. Natalie has a kind of psychology of lying. What does she think about lying? Does everyone lie sometimes?

20. Natalie and Sarah have a threatening experience with a truck driver when they are younger. Have you ever been the victim of this kind of abuse? How does Sarah's mother react when she finds out? Why doesn't Natalie tell her father?
21. What does the word *fine* mean to you? (Reread page 127.)
22. What makes Natalie believe she needs to recover from lovesickness? (Reread page 162.)
23. When Natalie checks her messages near the end of the novel (pages 189–190), she has three new voice mails. Who are they from? Which ones show real love? How do they show that? How does Natalie's cell phone serve as a symbol in the story?
24. Ethan appears early in the story and at the end of the story. How is he different from Adam?
25. By the end of the novel, what has Natalie learned about herself? Do you think she will be able to keep Adam out of her life? Do you think she will take better care of herself in the future?
26. Love is one of the novel's most important themes, but what kind of love? What does the word *love* mean in this story?
27. By the end of the novel, what has Natalie learned about love?

A Writer's Craft

1. Nora Raleigh Baskin makes strong use of detail, specifically in her use of "threes": three examples that reveal character or feelings. Early in the novel (page 3), Natalie lists some of the things her mother left—a lopsided clay bowl, a collage, pressed wildflowers—and then a surprising fourth: "And me." The author uses the element of surprise as a form of contrast, by offering smaller, seemingly pedestrian details and then bringing in a bigger idea or action. Are there other instances in the novel where she uses this technique of "list with a twist"? Is it effective?
2. The author uses a number of similes and metaphors throughout the novel. Find some of them and discuss

what they tell us about Natalie's intelligence and powers of observation.

Here are some examples:

Page 8: "The smoke from the exhaust blows up and across my window like a miniature H-bomb."

Page 9: "Her skin is the color of coffee beans before they are ground, and shiny like that."

Page 14: "Our voices collided and hers was swallowed up like beach sand under the tide."

Page 40: "His lips were soft, and his breath was sweet, like Jolly Ranchers."

Page 99: "Claire keeps her suitcase upright between her legs, with her feet like bookends."

Page 117: "In the moonlight, their white nightgowns glowed like cobwebs after a rain."

3. On her journey, Natalie has chance encounters and makes connections with seemingly random strangers in the bus terminal, on the bus, at Our Dog House, and in her mother's neighborhood. Why do you think the author includes these particular stories?
4. How do the people telling these stories—and the stories of love themselves—help Natalie? Why are the encounters so brief?
5. Is it realistic that Natalie feels such a strong connection to these strangers? What techniques does the author use as she weaves these love stories into Natalie's story?
6. Why does the author use a quotation at the beginning of each chapter? Do these epigraphs enhance the story? Which one is your favorite? Why?

This discussion guide was written by Robin Millay, Reading Specialist and Secondary Language Arts Teacher, Bethesda, Maryland.



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