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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Though *Girl in Shades* is written in first person, with Maya's mind-reading abilities she has some of the advantages of an omniscient narrator. How does this biased omniscience alter our understanding of the other characters? Does it make us more sympathetic to them or less?
2. In Maya's classroom the students sing, "My eyes are blind, I cannot see. I have not brought my specs with me." But in *Girl in Shades*, seeing is about more than eyes. What other ways of seeing are explored? How do they shape Maya? What lessons can we take from them?
3. Buffy is physically blind, but other characters are guilty of intentional blindness, or perhaps "selective sight." Which other characters could qualify as blind, and what are the consequences of their compromised vision?
4. Corey Hart makes several guest appearances in the book

with his lyrics and the letter Maya writes to him. What does Corey represent, and what is the purpose of these musical touchstones?

5. The author employs letters and diaries as a narrative device. How do these personal missives change the way you feel about Mari and Steven?
6. Maya gets a tattoo that starts as Marigold but turns into Maya, reasserting her independence. But as she grows older, are there ways that Maya turned into Marigold?
7. When she's staying with Leah and Buffy, Maya hears Buffy thinking, "Choose your actions carefully. Guilt can cripple you." Should Maya be feeling guilty about anything?
8. Amar is "not really a fatherly type." While we might hope for an emotional reunion in India, Maya finds more of a guru than a father. How does this encounter help her on her journey?
9. In many ways, *Girl in Shades* is an exploration of what it means to be a parent. How do the different characters view parenthood? What other characters (besides Marigold, Steven, and Amar) might be considered parents to Maya? Why?
10. In the second-last chapter, Maya feverishly writes her life story, creating one of the narrative threads of *Girl in Shades*. How does this diary compare to Maya's mother's diary? What differences does it reveal between the two people?
11. Chapter 34 offers a flash into the past, a sort of coda that concludes the work. What is the significance of this domestic scene? Does it build on the closure at the end of Chapter 33?

A GUIDE TO AURAS BY ALLISON BAGGIO

There is no one definitive guide for reading auras, most likely because most of us can't see colours around people's bodies and don't have much use for one. I think though that there are some instinctive feelings that we all attach to certain colours, which guide how we interpret them — for example, what makes you choose a certain colour shirt in the morning, or choose one particular colour as your favourite?

I've known people who claimed to be able to see auras, and they had very clear ideas about what the colours mean, probably because of the feelings these colours brought up in them. I think this is the way that Maya finds meaning in the colours she sees. However, when I decided to incorporate aura-reading into *Girl in Shades*, I had to find a way to be consistent with how I was presenting the various shades of colour.

I developed for myself a kind of "Aura Guide" that was a product of my intuition, as well as some research about what colours typically mean when associated with auras and the chakras.

This information varies, but I found that if I followed my own feelings initially, the research I did was fairly consistent with it. So here is the definitive guide to the auras in *Girl in Shades*:

RED: Any shade of red in the book always has to do with thoughts about the physical body or someone acting in a superficial way. For example, a character who is concerning himself with money or how he is being perceived by others will probably have a reddish glow around him.

ORANGE: Orange and its related shades are most often associated with sexuality or creativity (or better yet, both!). So orange will be seen in someone who is thinking about creating in some respect, or who is focused on sexual feelings for another character.

YELLOW: Yellows are uplifting and signs of confidence in a character. A person with a yellow aura is either feeling a lot of joy, or has a lot of faith in themselves and the fact that everything is going to work out.

GREEN: Shades of green are associated with love and caring. A person who is nurturing another person may have green around them, or family members who are feeling love for each other may appear green in Maya's eyes.

BLUE: Blues in the book are associated with communication. Any character trying really hard to communicate with another character will probably have a blue aura.

PURPLE: Any shade of violet or purple represents spirituality in the book. A character who exhibits these shades is probably experiencing some sort of enlightenment or is calmly in touch with his or her authentic self.

BLACK/GREY/MUDDY: Dark auras that include shades of black, grey, or brown are found around characters who are experiencing unsettled or negative emotions such as grief, confusion, or fear.

WHITE: One standard I found in my aura research was that white auras are usually only seen at the time of a person's death — an absence of an aura, if you will, as the soul prepares to leave the body. The story starts with one of these.

Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR

BACKLIT: Do you have a writing routine?

ALLISON: I used to before my kids were born. I worked full-time, so I would usually write on weekends. I would sleep in, get up, and relax without TV or conversation, then I would go into this one room in my house and write feverishly for usually about two hours or about 2,000 words. This is the routine I used to write the first draft of *Girl in Shades*.

Now, two babies later, things have changed. I have to work harder to find the time to write, and it's not usually on a regular schedule. I do know that I work best in the mid-morning, but this isn't always possible. I have to fit the time in when I can, and now that I have kids, I have a lot less time to get myself into the "space for writing." That's okay though, those early sessions were great training.

Sometimes I think that I don't need any more time than I have because I can usually only write for about two hours at a time, before getting mentally exhausted. But the act of doing it

is euphoric and I feel such a sense of satisfaction afterwards. It's addictive. I usually aim for around 1,500–2,000 new words each time I write. These days, I do have some set hours in the week that I write, but I am also always working to fit it in around my kids' schedule. This has no doubt made me more efficient as a writer.

I recently started writing on a Neo2 machine (think full-sized keyboard, tiny screen, and no other capabilities except typing). It is amazing because I can take it anywhere and it doesn't need to be plugged in. It has made me very productive as it doesn't allow me to be distracted by anything on the internet or by editing as I write because I can only see a few lines. I now write my first drafts of everything on it, usually in libraries and coffee shops to get away from regular life.

BACKLIT: What book do you wish you'd written?

ALLISON: *The Time Traveler's Wife* by Audrey Niffenegger. I am a huge fan of stories that integrate the metaphysical/mystical with the everyday. I love a story like *The Time Traveler's Wife* that can include supernatural elements without turning it into a science fiction book. I find the idea of time travel fascinating and am envious of how Niffenegger was able to handle the various time periods in this book. I imagine this would be a huge task to take on mentally. I get a bit obsessive about the consistency of plot points to begin with, and this would probably take it to another level entirely. That said, I would love to include elements of time travel in something I write someday.

BACKLIT: Who are your literary heroes?

ALLISON: Jane Austen, Barbara Gowdy, Alice Sebold, Miriam Toews, Stephenie Meyer (for what she managed to do after having a dream about some sparkly vampires).

BACKLIT: If *Girl in Shades* had a soundtrack, what would be on it?

ALLISON: This one is kind of easy, since *Girl in Shades* is

essentially built on a handful of Corey Hart songs. I really do see these songs as a soundtrack to the novel, and they have provided so much inspiration for me with setting the emotional pitch of the scenes (particularly in later drafts). So even though I would like to be more creative, I have to say mainly the four songs quoted in the book: “Sunglasses at Night” (thank you, Corey for this wonderful metaphor), “Never Surrender” (I still tear up when hearing this and thinking about Maya), “Boy in the Box,” and “I Am by Your Side.”

BACKLIT: Which books have influenced you and why?

ALLISON:

1. *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret.* by Judy Blume — I think that reading this book as a child made me fall in love with first-person narrative. I was totally infatuated with the idea of being able to get inside someone's head and hear all their intimate thoughts! (Still am, I think.)
2. *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger — Again, it's the first person, “in-the-moment” narrative that got me when I read this one in my early twenties. I think my reading and writing preferences from here on have been guided by this inward-looking type of story.
3. *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen — Though I struggled through a number of her novels in my university English classes, I am very envious of Jane Austen's handling of character and the complicated web of relationships she creates.
4. *We So Seldom Look on Love* by Barbara Gowdy — Loved this short story collection (and all of Barbara's other books, really). I love the uniqueness of every one of her stories. She taught me to follow my instincts and to not doubt that a bizarre and mar-

ginalized individual could make a compelling character that your readers would feel for.

5. *Conversations with God* by Neale Donald Walsch — There was a period of time in my life where I only read these kinds of new age-y spiritual type books. They gave me guidance, peace, and valuable new perspectives. I'd like to think they also gave me some insights into the motivations of the characters I create.
6. *Journal of a Solitude* by May Sarton — As an introvert, I love the idea of being alone with nothing to do but be creative. So I found this sleepy journal quite glamorous actually, and still think about it a lot.
7. *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold — Again, I love the metaphysical integrated seamlessly into literary fiction, and was also charmed by the originality of the first-person voice in this story.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ALLISON BAGGIO's fiction has been published in literary journals across Canada, including *Room*, *LICHEN*, and *subTerrain*. Her columns have appeared in *Today's Parent* and the *Toronto Star*. She is a graduate of the Humber School for Writers and lives in Whitby, ON. You can learn more about her at AllisonBaggio.com.