

As Simple as It Seems

By Sarah Weeks

Discussion Guide

About the Book

Verbena Ellen Colter is eleven years old the summer she finds out that her parents aren't the people she thought they were—and it sure explains a lot. Her mean streak, for one thing, makes a lot more sense. When Pooch, a boy from the city, moves in next door for the summer, Verbie accidentally convinces him that she's a ghost—and suddenly she has an opportunity to be someone else entirely. Verbie reinvents herself and discovers what it's like to be the mischievous, brave, generous girl her real mother has always loved.



Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean for someone to be “warped” or “trouble from the get-go” (page 3)? Is Verbie right to think that if Uncle Mike was trouble, she must be trouble too?
2. Verbie can usually tell when she messes up, and she wants to tell her mother “how sorry” she is for being “ugly and small and mean” (page 35). If Verbie really wants to be someone else, why does she keep saying such awful things to her mom? Do you agree with her that “mean is mean” (page 35)?
3. What do scrapbooking, fostering animals, and sharing food mean to Verbie’s mother? What does keeping the tools perfectly organized mean to her father?
4. What makes someone a good friend? Was Annie a good friend before she started hanging out with Heather Merwin? Could she be a good friend again? What about Verbie—is she a good friend to Pooch?
5. “Flatlander” and “podunk” aren’t nice words, but they reflect the way New Yorkers and people from Clydesdale feel about one another. Have you ever spent time at a place far away from home? What did you think about the people who lived there before you went to visit? Were they as you expected, or were they different?
6. Why does Verbie mean so much to her mother? What do you think Verbie means when she says her “mother’s definition of ‘perfect’ was different from the rest of the world’s” (page 7)?
7. Compare and contrast Verbie’s mom with Pooch’s mom. Why do you think Verbie assumes that Pooch’s mom must be a movie star if she’s had plastic surgery?
8. Describe Pooch’s physical appearance. Why does Pooch dress the way he does? What does he carry in his pockets?
9. Was it mean for Verbie to let Pooch keep thinking she was a ghost? Would you have been mad if you were Pooch? Has anyone ever tricked you about something that you felt was important? How did being tricked make you feel?
10. Why was Verbie so upset when her mother shredded the nightgown? What did the nightgown mean to Verbie?
11. What would you have named the boat? Pooch tells Verbie about how Native Americans used to change their names after important events in their lives. If you could change your name, what would it be? Why?
12. What do you think will happen when you die? Do your friends and family believe the same thing? Why or why not?



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Extension Activities

1. **The More You Know.** Since her mother, Grace, was an alcoholic, Verbie was born with fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS). Research this condition. How does being born with FAS affect a baby? What changes happen as the baby starts to grow up? Is there any way to reverse the effects of FAS? Share your findings with your classmates by creating a brochure that warns about the dangers of FAS.
2. **Ideas about Religion.** Pooch and Verbie discuss ideas about death, reincarnation, and what happens to your soul when you die. For most people, family and religion have a large influence on what they believe, but it can be important to learn about other beliefs, too. Choose a religion other than your own and research what people who follow that religion have to say about death. Use a Venn diagram to compare your personal beliefs with the ones you researched.
3. **Ghostly Experiences.** Verbie has some pretty silly explanations about what life is like as a ghost. It's your turn: Pretend that you're a ghost and create a short presentation that explains to your classmates how you're able to walk around the classroom in broad daylight. What things might your classmates think they know about ghosts that just aren't true?
4. **Alternate Life.** Describe what Verbie might have been like if she'd grown up with Uncle Mike. Try rewriting one scene from the book featuring your imagined Verbie. What might happen when alternate Verbie meets Pooch for the first time? What might alternate Verbie do when Annie decides to spend her birthday weekend with Heather Merwin?
5. **Fictional Artifacts.** Verbie and Pooch both like to collect things and build things. Make a display by collecting several important artifacts from the book. You could create the bottle in which Pooch traps the mouse's soul, the boat all patched up with bark, or the raggedy old nightgown that Verbie wears when she's a ghost. Write a short description of each item so that your classmates know how it illustrates a significant part of the story.

About the Author



Matt Peyton/Getty Images

Sarah Weeks is the critically acclaimed author of many picture books and novels, including *So B. It*, an ALA Notable Children's Book and a YALSA Top Ten Best Book for Young Adults, which was also named to numerous state award lists. She is one of the founding members of Authors Readers Theatre, a troupe of authors that travels across the country performing for students, teachers, librarians, and parents. Sarah Weeks lives in New York with her two sons. You can visit her online at www.sarahweeks.com.

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