

## **Discussion Guide**

"Carolyn Mackler is a remarkably astute observer of human frailties and hearts. In four interlocking tales of redemption and romance, she reminds us why we're alive and what we might mean to one another if we'd only reach out."—E. Lockhart, author of

The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks

## About the Book

Jena arrives at Paradise, a resort in the Caribbean, wishing her life was as cool as the celebrities she idolizes, and that she was as confident as Skye, her family friend and a beautiful actress. But Skye is secretly coming to terms with the fact that everything in her life is an act—and that for once she wants to feel something real. Dakota is a charmer who comes between them, but his player façade really hides a secret grief. And his brother, Owen, comes to Paradise more connected to his online life than his real one. *Tangled* tells how these four characters interact with and influence one another, exploring the differences between outward appearance and inner reality. The novel entertains with stories of love, lust, fantasy, and the truly remarkable power of connection.

# A Conversation with Carolyn Mackler

### What inspired you to write Tangled?

I thought of the idea for *Tangled* several years ago. I pictured four teenagers, two boys and two girls, who meet on a trip and somehow all of their lives are drastically changed because of it. Early on, I knew the boys would be brothers, but I wasn't sure how the girls would know each other. Maybe cousins? And then, *aha!*, I realized their moms would be old friends and the girls keep getting forced together even though they don't have a thing in common.

At first, I pictured them meeting on a plane en route to Paris. I spent a semester in college there and I definitely would have welcomed a research trip back. But every time I thought of Paris, all I could see were a bunch of teenagers at the top of the Eiffel Tower, one maybe threatening to jump off, and it wasn't working for me. But then,

when my son was about a year old, we went on a vacation to a lovely resort in the Caribbean. While we were there, I kept noticing teenagers trekking around the grounds, especially a boy with shaggy hair who wore thoroughly ironic moccasins even though the temperature was eighty-five. One night, I was soaking in the hot tub and reading a book by dim light, and Moccasin Boy walked over and climbed in the hot tub, too. I didn't say a word to him, but it was another aha! moment. I thought, That's Dakota. And I decided that one of my girl characters would be in the hot tub—the shyer one who has less experience with boys. But the big question was: How would they end up talking to each other? Once I came up with the answer—the suicide note—that's when the story started getting exciting in my head.

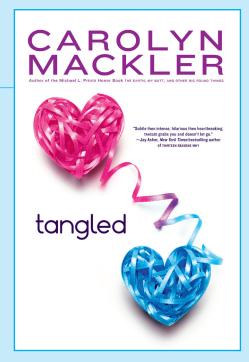
# A Conversation with Carolyn Mackler (continued)

#### Which of the four narrators in Tangled is most like you?

Some days I'd say Jena, other days I'd say Owen. Like both of them, I fend off that inner voice—the voice that doubts myself, that has to give myself pep talks, that sometimes comes up with snarky or wry observations. I suppose I'm more of the observer-type than the life of the party. Then again, of all the stories, I loved writing Dakota's the most. I have such a tender spot for him and his struggles. There are bits of me in all four of them. I have to have that in order to relate to a character.

#### What does Paradise represent to you?

I named the resort Paradise because, for one, I love the first line of *Tangled*: "Paradise sucked until I found the suicide note." I'd want to read a book like that! But also, I liked the name Paradise because it seems like everything will be perfect and flawless there, and yet it's



so not. Jena, Skye, Dakota, and Owen all come to Paradise with their own baggage, even if you can't see it right away. That's a big part of what this book is to me: Even though you see people one way on the surface, if you got inside their heads and really knew their stories, you'd realize that maybe life is a lot harder for them than it looks, or maybe they had reasons for doing something that seemed terrible at the time. I suppose there's a lot more lurking in Paradise than we ever see at first.

#### Friendship—both its rewards and its pitfalls—is a principal theme in your novels. Why?

For one, because I write about teenagers. And what's most important in your teen years? Family, of course, is crucial, and a stable family can help make adolescence a lot easier. But your friends are your lifeblood, your story. Without friends, the world can seem like a bleak place. And with friends, well, even the worst stuff feels more manageable, and maybe even worthy of an inside joke. I had some low points in my teen years, but I was saved by friendships. I had a best friend, Stephanie, and we were always there for each other. As far as the pitfalls, with all the intensity you have with your friends during those years, imagine how devastating it can be when things don't work out. I lost some close friendships—not in my teens but in my early twenties—and I still feel sad about them.

#### What do you most hope readers will take away from the novel?

I hope readers are affirmed by the power of connection. As I was writing *Tangled*, I was thinking so much about how people can have an effect on one another's lives. Look at how Jena, Dakota, Skye, and Owen all change one another, in ways that some of them may never know. I was thinking about how important it is, sometimes, to put down our phones and our blogs and our computers, and connect with another human, face-to-face. On the flip side, I was also thinking about how our blogs and computers help us connect in ways we never would have before. Like Owen, writing his blog, which connected him to Jena, which ultimately led to a real-life connection of which he would have been completely incapable before. And Skye, being able to click around on a social-networking site and discover truths about her father that she'd never been able to uncover in seventeen years with her mom. I was even intrigued by the tiny connective tissue that we never realize is there. Like that deck of cards that Jena is playing solitaire with at the beginning of the story. At the end of Jena's story, we've got Skye and Dakota playing with them. In Dakota's story, we learn that Skye left them with him by mistake. In the last story, we realize that Dakota passed them along to Owen, who has the cards with him when he takes the bus to meet Jena. So the cards have come full circle, through all the connections, even though no one ever knows it!

# **Tangled Discussion Guide**

## **Discussion Questions**

- 1. Jena says that in her sixteen years of life, she's "had yet to experience love or heartbreak (or even much inspiration)," so she's decided to "stockpile other people's musings about those things" (p. 5). Can you relate to Jena's feelings? Do you find it interesting or reassuring to read other people's musings about things that you haven't yet experienced for yourself?
- 2. How does Jena's decision to be "luscious" affect how she views herself (p. 59)? Why does she have trouble maintaining this view after she finds Dakota and Skye together? What outside influences can sometimes make it hard for you to see yourself in a more positive light?
- 3. How did you feel when you read the last page in Jena's story? Can you relate? Do you think it's true that some people have all the luck?
- 4. Why do you think Skye leaves her suicide notes in public places? Do you see any similarities between Skye and Dakota?
- 5. Several characters act on the impulse to do things that they know will ultimately be bad for them; for example, Jena eats the Twix bar and Dakota benches the extra weight. Why do you think they do these things?
- 6. Did you feel differently about Skye and Dakota after reading the sections they narrated than you did when you only saw them from Jena's point of view? Do they redeem themselves when you see the larger context for their actions at Paradise? Do you feel compassion for them?
- 7. Do you think Dakota changes as a result of the friendship he strikes up with Shasta? Why or why not?
- 8. What do you think Owen's name for his blog, Loser with a Laptop, suggests about how he views himself? Owen says that he meant the name to be ironic—do you think that's the whole truth (p. 230)? What are the benefits and drawbacks of having an online social life versus socializing in person? How do these two forms of social interaction work in tandem?

- 9. Why do you think Carolyn Mackler chooses to tell Dakota's side of the story before Owen's? What might her reasons have been for starting with Jena's story?
- 10. Compare and contrast what you know about the relationships between Dakota/Natalie, Dakota/Shasta, and Jena/Owen. Do any of the relationships seem familiar to you? Which of these types of relationships do you see the most in your daily life? Which one do you most aspire to have for yourself?
- 11. Each of the four main characters has a very different relationship with his/her parents. How do you think they were influenced by their respective families? Would Skye have been different if she'd known about her father sooner, or would Dakota have changed if he lived with someone other than his dad?
- 12. Which main character do you connect with the most? Which of these characters do you most want to be like? Why? Which character was the hardest for you to relate to? Why?
- 13. How do you feel about the structure of this book—a continuous story told in four voices? Do you find any one character's voice to be more compelling than the others? Reread the first page. What were your initial reactions to Jena? Do you hear her voice differently now that you've read the whole story?
- 14. Jena copies a quotation from Eleanor Roosevelt into her everything book: "Nobody can make you feel inferior without your consent" (p. 20). Do you agree or disagree with this sentiment? Think about your answer in terms of Jena and Skye's relationship.
- 15. Jena also has a quotation from Max Ehrmann in her everything book: "Whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should" (p. 131). Does this quotation comfort you? Do you believe it to be true? How does this quotation relate to the novel as a whole?
- 16. What things, both tangible and intangible, connect the four narrators in the novel? How are their lives tangled up with one another's?

# **Tangled Discussion Guide**

# **Creative Writing Prompts**

- 1. **Everything Book.** Taking inspiration from Jena's everything book, keep your own journal of quotations that inspire you. Does collecting these sayings affect how you think about things? Is your everything book something you'd want to share with other people? Why or why not?
- 2. **Loser with a Laptop.** Write an entry for Owen's blog, Loser with a Laptop, using what you know about the characters in the story. You could describe something that happens in the first three sections of the novel from Owen's perspective, imagine something that happens before we meet the characters, or make up an event that happens after the book ends. Keep in mind that Owen loves his blog because, as he says, "I can be completely honest, can say things that get stuck in my throat in my real life" (p. 230).
- CAROLYN
  AUthor of the Michael L. Printz Honor Book The EARTH, MY BUTY, AND OTHER BIG ROUND THRISS

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- 3. **Imaginary Character.** Jena and Dakota can't be the only ones who find Skye's notes about suicide. Imagine a story of someone else who finds a note Skye has written. How does that person react? What does he or she decide to do? Does your imagined character understand that Skye is trying to tell them "just how bad it can get" (p. 171)? Why or why not?
- 4. **Imaginary Letter.** Imagine the sort of letters that Dakota and Shasta write each other. Compose a note from Dakota to Shasta. Through Dakota's voice, what can you show about the things that are important in his life? How is his relationship with Shasta helping him become more mature? How can this maturity reveal itself through his writing?
- 5. **Tangled Angles.** Skye begins to understand what happened to her father when she reads the email from Andres Oliveira; meanwhile, Skye's mother is oblivious to her daughter's realization (p. 201). Imagine another situation in which one person's entire world changes while the other person is doing something as banal as making watermelon soup. Take a page from Carolyn Mackler's multiperspective writing in *Tangled* and tell the story of what happens from both characters' perspectives.



## **About the Author**

**Carolyn Mackler** is the award-winning author of five novels for teens: *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things,* winner of a Printz Honor; *Love and Other Four-Letter Words; Vegan Virgin Valentine; Guyaholic*; and *Tangled.*Three of her books have been named ALA Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers and three have been chosen as IRA Young Adults' Choices. Carolyn Mackler lives in New York City with her husband and young son. You can visit her online at www.carolynmackler.com.

