

Sarah
THE
PROBABLY



OF
EVERYTHING



THE PROBABILITY OF EVERYTHING & THE SHAPE OF LOST THINGS

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

Sarah Everett



Photo © Cassandra Williams

is the author of *The Probability of Everything* and *The Shape of Lost Things*, as well as several books for teens. *Charlotte's Web* was the first book that ever made her cry, and while she despises spiders, she still has an abiding love of stories that move her. When she is not reading or writing, she is dreaming about summer, gearing up for her next travel adventure, perfecting her tree pose, or yodeling with her dog. She lives in western Canada.

Common Everett Themes

FAMILY

The close connections between loved ones who can be as much wells of care, love, and support as sources of heartache, anguish, and devastation.

FRIENDSHIP

The complexities and emotional intensity of finding friends, losing friends, and what happens when friends or feelings change.

LEARNING

The advancement of a character's knowledge and understanding, guided by their own curiosity and, at times, situational necessity.

SELF-AWARENESS

A character's recognition of their distinctiveness (positive and negative) as a unique individual and their consideration of how their own understanding or that of others about who they are has changed.

BEREAVEMENT

The experience and ongoing state of loss in which lack and absence and irretrievability become a lens through which a character sees their world.

GRIEF

The emotional, cognitive, and behavioral expressions and responses to death, change, and other losses.

RESILIENCE

The survival of acute or chronic trauma, the beginning of recovery, and the reality of being forever changed by one's own strength.

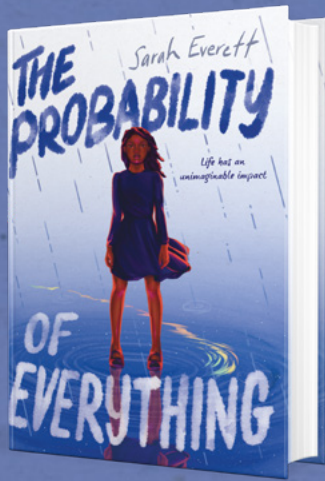
COPING

The healthy, maladjusted, or neutral means by which a character subsists through ongoing stress, trauma, and upheaval.

SCIENCE AND ART

Two halves of the same coin, two overlapping points on the same spectrum, two intertwined branches of knowledge from the same tree. Characters may already understand or eventually come to understand the pair's mutual dependence—neither exists without the other.

The Probability of Everything



ABOUT THE BOOK

The apocalypse is coming and nothing can stop it. With only a few days before an asteroid wipes out everything she has ever known, eleven-year-old Kemi uses research, scientific facts, and the math of probability to stave off despair. She even creates a time capsule to preserve one item from each of her family members—something they love the most. The next earthlings or visiting aliens will now know how much Kemi loves her mom's art, her sister's curiosity, and every single thing about her dad. But a time capsule and maybe even probability are no match for the approaching devastation, and as the time ticks down, Kemi must face the truth of her world's end.

Pre-reading Activities

BRAINSTORM!

Lead a class discussion about realistic fiction that includes science vs. science fiction. What's the difference between the two and why might it matter? As students respond, make a list of the differences or criteria for each genre.

BOOK TOUR AND K-W-L DISCUSSION

Before reading *The Probability of Everything*, allow the class to take a self-guided tour of its exterior and front matter. Have students share what they notice about the cover, the flap copy, the title and title page, and the epigraph. Take notes as they share. Based on what they notice, discuss with the students what they think the book might be about and why. Record their thoughts and what they know about the book from their "tour." Next, move the discussion to what the students don't yet know and are wondering about. Record what they want to know or expect to learn by reading the book (some of these responses might be posed as questions).

PAIR-SHARE

Put students in pairs or groups of three, and have them respond to the following prompts:

What do you know about probability? Define it briefly in your own words.

When has the question of something being probable or not probable (like earning a good grade or having your favorite food for dinner) come up in your life?

What contributes to something being more or less probable?

Give the pairs two minutes to jot down ideas, then one minute for the first person to share their responses and one minute for the second person to share theirs. Have pairs briefly share with the class. Consider compiling a working definition for "probability" to return to throughout the novel.

REFLECTION

Have students reflect on and jot down responses to the following prompts:

Think of a time when you experienced a big change. Maybe the change happened to you (like starting at a new school) or maybe it happened to someone else but still affected you (like a friend moving away).

How did you feel when this big change happened? Was it a sudden change or did you have time to adjust to it?

If you could make it so the change never happened, would you and why?

Discussion Questions

1. When explaining her older cousin Jen's dreams of becoming a Hollywood hairstylist, Kemi also mentions her aunt and uncle's less-than-enthusiastic response because "they thought she should become something important..." [33]. What is Jen's parents' definition of "important" here? Why doesn't a career in hair artistry fit into their definition?
2. Discuss this line on page 151: "The things you couldn't hold on to sometimes helped to understand the things you could." What kind of things do you think Kemi is referring to? Does this statement have more than one meaning in the context of Kemi's story?
3. Early on, Kemi realizes that the next earthlings will remember important and cool people, but not ordinary people like her family. What do you think about this conclusion? How do we remember people as a society? Who gets remembered and why?
4. When her searches about things to save during an apocalypse keep giving her web pages about surviving, Kemi dismisses them because surviving is impossible. "We would never be ourselves again, and wasn't that what surviving meant?" she asks [69]. What do you think? What does "surviving" mean?
5. Kemi's mom tells her she always wants her to see herself in books. Why is seeing yourself in the books you read important? What do you see of yourself in this book and its characters' identities, feelings, and choices? Why might it be important for readers to see part or all of themselves in a book like this one?
6. Discuss the plot twist at the end of Part I. As a literary device, plot twists unexpectedly and sometimes radically shift your perspective as a reader. What does this perspective shift do in the story? How does it change your understanding of the characters and the story events before and after the twist?
7. What is probability in this story? Set aside the literal definition and instead pick three words that describe how probability is characterized (e.g., safe, fun, frightening, etc.). Find some of the places in Part I and Part II where the concept of probability comes up. What does it mean for Kemi? How does it impact your understanding of her as a character and of her story?
8. Grief can certainly seem as big as an asteroid, and everyone grieves in their own way. Pick three characters that aren't Kemi. What does their grief look like—how do they express it? Does grief always appear as sadness? Support your answers with details from the text.
9. Take another look at the epigraph at the beginning of the book. What is the connection between the quote and the novel's story? Use evidence from the text to support your thoughts.
10. What is the significance of this book beginning with an ending and ending with a beginning? What about beginnings, endings, and surviving do you think the author hopes readers will think about and take with them?

Extension Activities

DAYS THAT SHAPED YOUR WORLD

In her notes about what to put in a time capsule, Kemi includes “newspaper clippings to remember the kinds of days that shaped the world” [74]. Have students reflect on the days that have shaped their world and choose four dates, excluding their own birthdays. Students will use newspapers to research events (local, national, and global) for each date. Finally, students will write a report or create a presentation to share their “On This Day” findings.

MUSIC FOR THE END OF THE WORLD

In Part I, as grown-ups are discussing logistics for their last day, Kemi’s uncle says the music has to be just right. Break the class into small groups of three or four to create apocalypse playlists. Groups will need to decide what their world-ending event is and choose five to seven songs for their playlists. Groups will also submit song annotations explaining why each song is “just right.”

HOW TO STOP AN ASTEROID

Give students, individually or in small groups, two research track options:

Research and write a report on real-life, local statistics relevant to the story (anti-Black violence, gun violence, redlining, white flight, etc.). Use national statistics whenever local data is insufficient or unavailable.

Research protest art from Black Lives Matter and other racial justice movements in the US and worldwide. Create your own art piece to protest the murder of Kemi’s dad and include an artist’s statement explaining your inspiration from your research.

Give students a word count for their written portions, image-use options or requirements, and bibliography parameters such as a minimum number of sources. Encouraging or requiring students to meet with their librarian for guidance finding and citing sources or asking a librarian to provide a research instruction session can help set students up for success.

“MAY THE PROBABILITY BE EVER IN YOUR FAVOR”

Probability plays a heavy role in this novel, but Kemi’s love for it is about more than just sadness and anxiety—it’s also about fun! Depending on your class size, prepare six or a dozen eggs for a game of Egg Roulette. You can select several willing volunteers to play or divide the class into teams with one player representing each. Be sure players are outfitted with hooded ponchos! Before beginning, have students calculate the probability of a player choosing a raw egg versus a hardboiled egg. After each turn, the class or a player’s team must recalculate the probability before they choose another egg. Switch this game up by having students choose one of three mystery eggs: one hardboiled and two raw. Once a student chooses, identify a raw egg from the two remaining, and then ask if they want to change to the final remaining egg or stick with their original choice. The student will then break their chosen egg: hardboiled means they win a prize and raw means they win a mess.

AFTER THE END OF EVERYTHING

Have students write an epilogue for the story in which Kemi’s time capsule is opened. How long has it been and how do readers know? What happened in the intervening time? Who is opening the capsule and why? How do they understand or react to the contents? What happens to the capsule next? Along with their epilogue, students will also submit a brief reflection essay about their writing process and how the details in their writing connect to the novel and/ Extension Activities or their interpretation of it.



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The Shape of Lost Things



ABOUT THE BOOK

Skye and Finn had been as close as Space and Time (nicknames bestowed by their physicist parents). Even after the divorce, the siblings shared an unshakable connection and a few secrets. But everything changed when Finn was abducted by their father. Now after four years of worry and heartache and wondering, Finn has returned home. But is he the same Finn? Skye tries to be patient, but the startling changes to Finn's personality are impossible to ignore. She turns to her camera to see if her photos can show her the truth like they always have, and suspicion takes root—the Finn that came home is an imposter. Skye is determined to gather the proof to unmask the Not-Finn so the search for her real brother can resume. But as she digs deeper and tries to reveal the deception, she faces a question four years in the making and much harder to answer: This Finn may not be the same Finn, but is she the same Skye?

Pre-reading Activities

BRAINSTORM!

Lead a word association session. What comes to mind when students hear the word "change"? Record their responses on a board or large poster paper to create a word cloud. When responses die down, ask students to tell you which words or phrases in the word cloud they feel are strongly related and why. Draw a line to represent each connection in the cloud.

BOOK TOUR AND K-W-L DISCUSSION

Before reading *The Shape of Lost Things*, allow the class to take a self-guided tour of its exterior and front matter. Have students share what they notice about the cover, the flap copy, the title, and title page. Take notes as they share. Based on what they notice, discuss with the students what they think the book might be about and why. Record their thoughts and what they know about the book from their "tour." Next, move the discussion to what the students don't yet know and are wondering about. Record what they want to know or expect to learn by reading the book (some of these responses might be posed as questions).

PAIR-SHARE

Put students in pairs or groups of three, and have them respond to the following prompt:

What are the similarities and differences between losing someone and someone changing? What kind of feelings come up in each scenario? Which scenario is least desirable?

Give the pairs one minute to jot down thoughts, one minute for the first person to share their responses, and one minute for the second person to share theirs. Have pairs briefly share with the class.

REFLECTION

Have students reflect on and jot down responses to the following prompt:

In what ways is your sense of self, your understanding of who you are, shaped by the important people in your life and your relationships with them? How does your sense of self change when you are with different people?

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think about this book's title? How does it connect to Skye and Finn as characters? How does it connect to the story as a whole? Use evidence from the text to support your answers.
2. Consider the Did You Knows throughout the story. How do these different physics concepts relate to the story? For example, the relationship between superposition (the principle that an object exists in multiple places at once) and Finn being both gone but present. Use evidence from the text to support your connections.
3. Several times throughout the novel, Skye is surprised by her own voice and words, as if they are something she doesn't control and aren't always aligned with her internal thoughts. What do you make of this disconnect? How does it impact Skye's role as narrator and your understanding of her character?
4. Discuss Skye's photography and the "pictured" and "not pictured" captions. What does photography mean to her? What does it tell you as a reader about her character and her perspective? What does Skye learn about the "truth" in her photos?
5. When Skye is considering the differences between "Keith" and "Dad" and which side of him is more real, she says, "I don't understand what a true self is, or if it really even exists" [80]. What do you think about this? How does the complexity and uncertainty about a true self relate to the characters' development, particularly Skye and Finn?
6. As Skye sets out to confirm that the Finn who came home is an imposter, she has some moments of doubt. Find some examples of these scenes. What is significant about these moments? What about them allows Skye to see past her doubts?
7. So many of Skye's relationships change, almost all at once. What do these changes have in common? Skye wishes several times that things would return to the normal she remembers from before Finn was taken. How do Skye's changing relationships with family and friends show readers how Skye has also changed?
8. Skye's family dynamics are complex to say the least, something she comments on several times. How do Skye's ideas about what a family is change over the course of the novel?
9. Readers get little of Finn's perspective on his abduction, his return, and his adjustment to the changes. Given what we do know about Finn from Skye's perspective and what he does share himself, why do you think he changed his mind about leaving again? What's important about it being his choice?
10. Does this story have a happy ending? Why do you think so? Jot down some working criteria for a happy ending—is it only about the ending itself? Support your answers with details from the text.



Extension Activities

NOT-SKYE SCENE

Have students choose any scene in which Skye interacts with other characters. Students will then write a new version of the scene from the perspective of a character who isn't Skye. What has the character observed within the events of the story? What assumptions do they make about Skye or other characters in the scene? What thoughts might they have that they don't share out loud? Give students word count guidelines and remind them that their portrayal of the character's thoughts, feelings, choices, and understanding of the interaction in the scene should connect to evidence in the original text or story overall. Especially eager students can also ensure their scene's dialogue and narration align with and expand on the details in the original text.

NOW YOU KNOW!

Split students into groups and assign each one a Did You Know from the book. Each group will research their assigned concept and write up their findings. Switch up the groups so that each group has one person from each Did You Know group. Each group member will take five minutes to explain their Did You Know concept to their new group and discuss their research findings. Have groups share any connections they made between the concepts and/or the novel.

SPACETIME TIME!

Give students a [model demonstration](#) of Einstein's general relativity. You can prime students' interest with a video and consider collaborating with colleagues across disciplines to maximize engagement. Once students have had a chance to observe the model in action and take notes, have them each write a brief reflection piece that connects what they observed about the physics principle of gravity to the characters and events. Skye and Finn's nicknames are a great place to start!

TIME LOG

Have students write a collection of personal journal entries for Finn, writing five to eight diary entries that he might have kept during the four years with his father or after his return home. Students can choose to expand on what Finn shares about his time away and what Skye observes about his time home or imagine entirely new experiences. Either way, remind students that, in journal writings, expressing thoughts and feelings matters just as much as recording and reacting to day-to-day events. Just like in the novel, none of Finn's experiences away or at home will be all good or all bad.

CREATURE CHARACTER

Divide students into small groups and have them choose two characters to analyze with a body biography. The groups will also play Skye's animal name game and decide what animal best captures each of their two characters. The character body biographies then will use the animal bodies instead of human bodies. Give students a list of required analytical details to include (spine for values/beliefs, feet for motivation, head for thoughts or learning, etc.), and depending on the animal, students may have some extra details to include as well.

This guide was written by Anastasia M. Collins. Stacy (she/they) is a librarian, youth literature scholar, and an anti-oppression educator. You can follow them at [@DarkLiterata](#).

