

When it comes to academics, Auden knows all about being the best. In life, however, she's learned that it's easier to avoid the things that don't guarantee success. One of her biggest challenges is her insomnia, and so she fills her nights with studying and preparing for college. When a bizarre gift from her globe-trotting, carefree brother arrives, Auden is inspired to accept her father's invitation to join him and his new family for the summer before she heads to college. After witnessing the conflict between her father and his new wife, a late-night project lands Auden a job at Clementine's, a local boutique; and it is here that she opens her mind and heart to new friends and experiences. With the help of Eli, a local boy with a tragic past, Auden begins to learn that sometimes life can be messy and that success or failure isn't measured by how often you crash, it's measured by how many times you get back on the bike and try to ride.

Discussion Questions for *Along for the Ride*

- Why is it so difficult for Auden to feel like a "normal" teenager?
- In what ways are Hollis' and Auden's childhoods different? How has this affected them as they have matured and made important decisions about their lives?
- Auden and her new sister, Thisbe, are named after literary influences in her father's life. Why are names so important to Auden's dad, Robert? What does he believe the right name will do for his children? How does the baby's name cause a conflict between Auden's dad and Heidi? What does the result of their disagreement indicate about their relationship?
- Auden's mom tells her, "People don't change. If anything you get more set in your ways as you get older, not less." (page 13) Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? Are there any characters in the novel who show considerable change throughout the course of the story?
- Explain the significance of the picture frame Hollis sends home to Auden; why does the inscription, "The Best of Times" bother her so much? How does this gift serve as a catalyst for change in Auden's plans?
- Why does Auden feel she needs to stay with her dad and Heidi after their baby is born? What does she hope to gain from her visit?
- In what ways is Robert contributing to Heidi's sense of helplessness and depression? How would you describe his character?
- On her first night in Colby, Auden has a personal encounter with Jake. Why does she regret her actions? How do the other characters regard her because of this experience?
- Auden's mother calls her daughter regularly in order to receive reports about how things are going at Auden's father's. Why does her mother show so much interest in Robert's life?
- From Auden's perspective, the girls she works with at Clementine's (Maggie, Leah, and Esther) are typical teenage girls. In what ways is her vision reshaped as she gets to know them more intimately?

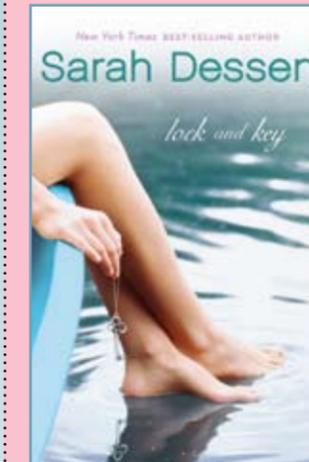
- Do you think Auden's mother is threatened by her daughter's choice to spend the summer with her father and his new family? What does her mother fear will happen?
- How does Auden's relationship with her step mother, Heidi, change? What does Auden discover about Heidi throughout the course of the story?
- Explain the significance of the picture frame Hollis sends home to Auden; why does the inscription, "The Best of Times" bother her so much? How does this gift serve as a catalyst for change in Auden's plans?
- Why does Auden feel she needs to stay with her dad and Heidi after their baby is born? What does she hope to gain from her visit?
- Auden's first encounter with Eli comes when she is taking her baby sister for a stroll in hopes of settling her down. When Eli observes the crying baby, Auden tells him, "It's been a long night." Eli comments, "Aren't they all." What can you infer from his statement?
- Describe Auden. Is she the type of person you would want to befriend? Why or why not?
- Auden thinks, "Stuff that would be weird in the bright light of day just wasn't so much once you passed a certain hour. It was like the dark just evened it all out, somehow." In what ways do the night time events liberate her?
- Since much of the action of the story takes place at night, do you think the relationship between Auden and Eli would have been the same if their time together had been during the day?
- In what ways are Auden and Eli similar? How are they different?
- Eli tells Auden, "It's never too late to have a happy childhood." (page 15) What does Eli do to help Auden change and grow as a person?
- Adam tells Auden, "It all counts, the bottom line is what defines you isn't how many times you crash, but the number of times you get back on the bike. As long as it's one more, you're all good." Do you agree? Why or why not?
- In what way does Auden finally learn to go "along for the ride"?

What's so great about Sarah Dessen? Read them all!



Visit the world of Sarah Dessen at Sarah-land.com

Viking • Puffin Books
Divisions of Penguin Young Readers Group
(bundles of ten) 978-0-670-01757-7



HC: 978-0-670-01088-2 • \$18.99
PB: 978-0-14-241472-9 • \$8.99

When Ruby's mother disappears, Ruby remains silent and lives alone. When she's discovered by the landlord, Ruby knows that the game is up. Social services place her in the care of her Cora, the sister she hasn't seen in ten years, and Cora's husband Jamie, whose down-to-earth demeanor makes it hard for Ruby to believe he founded the most popular networking Web site around. A luxurious house, fancy private school, a new wardrobe, the promise of college and a future—it's a dream come true. So why is Ruby such a reluctant Cinderella, wary and defensive? And why is Nate, the genial boy next door with some secrets of his own, unable to accept the help that Ruby is just learning to give?

Viking • Puffin Books
Divisions of Penguin Young Readers Group



HC: 978-0-670-06105-1 • \$18.99
PB: 978-0-14-241097-4 • \$8.99

Last year, Annabel was the girl who has everything—at least that's the part she played in the television commercial for Kopf's Department Store. This year, she's the girl who has nothing: no best friend because mean-but-exciting Sophie dropped her, no peace at home since her older sister became anorexic, and no one to sit with at lunch. Until she meets Owen Armstrong. Tall, dark, and music obsessed, Owen is a reformed bad boy with a commitment to truth telling. With Owen's help, maybe Annabel can face what happened the night she and Sophie stopped being friends.

Viking • Puffin Books
Divisions of Penguin Young Readers Group

Discussion Questions for *Just Listen*

- Do you believe that people who seem to have everything are truly happy? Why or why not?
- Annabel is unable to talk about what has happened to her; why do you think she chooses to remain silent about what has happened?
- Why does Annabel find it so difficult to be honest about her feelings in general? How have her own actions caused her to be in the miserable situation in which she finds herself?
- Due to the death of her own mother, Annabel's mother seems unaware of the emotional turmoil faced by her daughters. How does her emotional absence contribute to her daughters' problems?
- In what ways have Owen's issues with anger management shaped who he is today? Do you think he is a better friend to Annabel because of it? Why or why not?
- Owen tells Annabel, "Don't think or judge. Just listen." (page 183) Explain what you believe he means by this statement. Do you agree with him?
- In what ways could Annabel's family have dealt differently with Whitney's eating disorder?

Discussion Questions for *Lock and Key*

- When Ruby is discovered living alone, why is she so afraid of being taken from the yellow house? Why does she want to prove that she can make it on her own? Why does her mother abandon her?
- The new life Cora offers Ruby is ideal in many ways: they live in a beautiful home, Ruby gets to attend a private school, and she has a family on whom she can count. Why do you think Ruby wants to reject this new life?
- What is the significance of Ruby attempting to run away from her sister's home? Why do you think she ultimately decides to remain?
- In what ways is Nate in denial about his relationship with his father? Do you think he is right to excuse his behavior?
- Discuss the significance of the necklace trend that Ruby unintentionally starts. Why is the charm so important? What do you think the key symbolizes?
- What does Ruby learn from her relationship with Nate? How are their relationships with their individual families similar? In what ways are they different?
- From your experience, do you think it's difficult for most people to reach out for help? To whom do you turn when you are in need?

The Truth About Sarah Dessen Q&A

Q: In *Along for the Ride*, Auden is the daughter of university professors; did your own experience of being the daughter of academics influence the story in any way?

A: I was actually kind of worried about making Auden's parents professors, as I didn't want people to think they were based on my own. My parents are not nearly so dramatic! That said, growing up in an academic town as a "faculty brat" definitely shapes the way you see things. So Auden and I definitely share some of that outlook, even if our parents are very different.

Q: One of Auden's greatest challenges is her inability to sleep during the night. Have you from insomnia?

A: I've never had insomnia. I actually got the idea for Auden being up all night from the fact that I had a newborn, which totally changed my sleeping schedule. I'd be awake at two or three a.m. feeding her and wonder who else was up, and why. It got me thinking, and the story just came from there.

Q: Heidi, Auden's stepmother, has just had a baby and is struggling to adjust to the demands of motherhood. Did your own experiences with being a new mom shape this story thread?

A: Definitely. I was lucky in that my daughter was not colicky like Auden's baby sister Thisbe; but I still had my share of new-mom stress, and I was glad to have somewhere to write about it. That's the thing with writing YA. You have to be creative in working in more "adult" experiences, and secondary characters are a great way to do it.

Q: Most of the teen characters in the novel have grown up together in their small community. How similar to your own experience as a teen in a small town is this story?

A: I think there are good and bad things about being from a small town, where everyone knows everyone else. There is a sense of history and inclusiveness, which is very nice. At the same time, everyone knows EVERYONE, so it's hard to ever be anything new or different. I tried to show the various sides of that with Maggie's sentimentality and Leah's frustration when it came to Colby and the boys they knew there. They were like flip sides of the same coin.

Q: The setting for *Along for the Ride* is the fictional beach town of Colby, North Carolina, first used in your novel *Keeping the Moon*. What about this town drew you back and made you want to explore it further?

A: I knew I wanted to set the book at the beach, and it just seemed like a good fit to go back to Colby, a place that I (and a lot of my readers) already knew pretty well. Plus, both *Along for the Ride* and *Keeping the Moon* are stories about transformation and finding acceptance. In my mind, *Along for the Ride* is kind of a companion to the earlier novel. I was ready to go back to that place, and those themes, but take them further and do more. It's my hope that I achieved that.

Q: Fear both motivates and incapacitates many of the characters in the novel. What inspired you to use this as a major theme of *Along for the Ride*?

A: At the time I started the book, I was dealing with a whole new world of being a mom, and some days—like when I felt like I had no idea what I was doing—it was really scary. I am someone who likes to be in control, and when you have a child; you realize that that is just not in the cards very often. So I was having to adjust, and push through some things, and that carried into the book as well.

Q: What's the best part of writing for teens?

A: The audience is so enthusiastic. Adults are great readers as well, but they can't help but be a little more jaded. But when you write for teens, you're lucky enough to be getting to people just when they are discovering the amazing connection they can make with a story or character. They feel so much more, and are so much more involved in what they see on the page. It's a great thing.

Q: What influences your writing?

A: I'm influenced by everything, I think. What I read, what I see. The people in my life, the stories they tell (which I try not to steal, although it's hard when the stories are really good). But with this book especially, it's my own experiences that really provided the basis of what ended up on the page. Being awake at all hours, learning about being there for someone, it all came from what was happening to me.

Q: What advice can you give to aspiring writers?

A: The best advice is to read as much as you can, whenever you can. It's the only real way to learn things like dialogue and setting and plotting. I'd also say to just keep your eyes open and pay attention to the world around you. If you're a writer, you already see things in a different way from other people. You're more aware of the little details, tiny touches that maybe others might miss. The trick is to take that awareness and get it down on the page. And finally, I'd say that you have to believe in yourself. Because on the bad days, or when you get a bad review, you need to really know that there's a reason you do this that has nothing to do with anyone but you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sarah Dessen

Sarah Dessen grew up in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and attended UNC-Chapel Hill, graduating with highest honors in Creative Writing. She is the author of nine novels, including *Someone Like You* and *Just Listen*. A motion picture based on her first two books, entitled *How to Deal* was released in 2003. Sarah lives in Chapel Hill with her husband, daughter, and two very spoiled dogs, where she spends her time gardening, watching bad TV shows, and trying to break her addiction to the clearance rack at Gap. Visit the world of Sarah Dessen at www.sarah-land.com.



Reading Group Guide

Relationships. Romance. Real Life.

Sarah Dessen