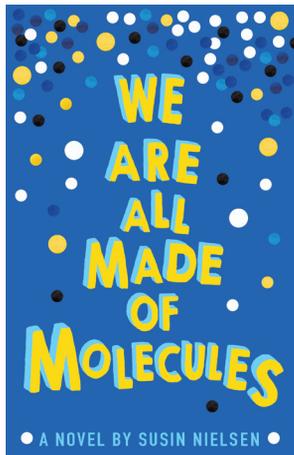


We Are All Made of Molecules by Susin Nielsen

A Guide for Reading Groups



When Stewart's dad and Ashley's mum move in together, Stewart and Ashley find themselves in a whole new family situation. Science-mad Stewart hopes Ashley can help him to fit in at his brand new school, but alpha-female Ashley is totally embarrassed by her geeky new 'step-brother' and desperate to keep the reason behind her parents' break-up a secret from her friends. How will they both cope with the tangled new relationships they face at school and at home in this funny and thought-provoking story?

Main characters

Stewart – gifted academically but lacking in social skills, he still misses his mum who died of cancer two years ago.

Ashley – popular and cool, but finding it difficult to cope with her parents' break-up and their new relationships.

Leonard – Stewart's dad who was widowed two years ago, but is now in a new relationship with Caroline.

Caroline – Ashley's mum who is recently divorced and works as a TV newsreader.

Phil – Ashley's gay dad who now lives in a house in the back garden of Ashley's home.

Jared – a high-school football star who Ashley believes would be her perfect boyfriend, but who bullies Stewart.

Key themes

- Family
- Grief
- Diversity
- Relationships
- Bullying
- Acceptance

Questions for discussion

1. What does Stewart think about the prospect of moving in with Caroline and Ashley? How does Ashley feel about her new family situation?

2. The story is told in alternating chapters from Stewart and Ashley's perspectives. What impression does this give you of Stewart and Ashley. How are their characters different? Do they share any similarities?

3. How does Stewart cope with his grief about his mother's death? How does this make you feel towards him?

4. 'Everything, and everyone, is interconnected.' (page 147)

What do you think Stewart means by this? How does this help you to understand the different relationships shown in the book?

5. 'Caroline had fallen in love with the person my dad is on the inside as well as on the outside.' (page 66)

Which characters in the book would you say are the same on the inside as they appear on the outside? Are there any characters who are different on the inside from how they appear on the outside? In what ways?

6. Ashley says she's at the top of the social ladder in her grade. How does this influence the way she behaves towards her friends and family?

7. Jared has an impact on both Ashley and Stewart's lives. How does your view of Jared change through the book?

You may find it useful to think about:

- Ashley's feelings towards Jared and the way he treats her at the beginning of their relationship.

- How Jared behaves towards Stewart, the way this changes and why.

- What you learn about why Jared was expelled from his previous school.

- What Jared says about Ashley behind her back.

- How Jared's behaviour towards Ashley changes and the way she feels about this.

8. Why do you think the protection squad chooses the logo 'We Are All Made of Molecules' for their T-shirts?

What message do you think this gives about the way people should treat one another?

Activity

1. 'Now I think of my new family not as a quadrangle, but as an octagon.' (page 302)

Choose one of the main characters and create a spider diagram showing his or her relationships with other characters in the book. You could use different colours to indicate positive or negative relationships and add short explanations to describe each of these relationships more fully. You should create two different spider diagrams: one showing this character's relationships at the beginning of the book and one showing this character's relationships at the end.

2. Write a leaflet from the 'We Are All Made of Molecules' protection squad. What would it say about how students should be treated at school and what advice would it give to new students?

Further reading

- Lisa Williamson's *The Art of Being Normal* explores questions of identity and dealing with difference.
- In *The Many Worlds of Albie Bright* by Christopher Edge, Albie uses science to try and help him come to terms with his mum's death.
- For another book about difficult family relationships and problems at school, try *Orbiting Jupiter* by Gary D. Schmidt.

Find out more

From naming his cat after Schrödinger's famous experiment to quoting Albert Einstein, science helps Stewart to make sense of the world and also inspires him to make up jokes and puns. Try to find out some amazing science facts to create your own jokes and puns. Here's some famous scientists to get you started: Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, Marie Curie, Stephen Hawking, Jane Gooding, Tim Berners-Lee.