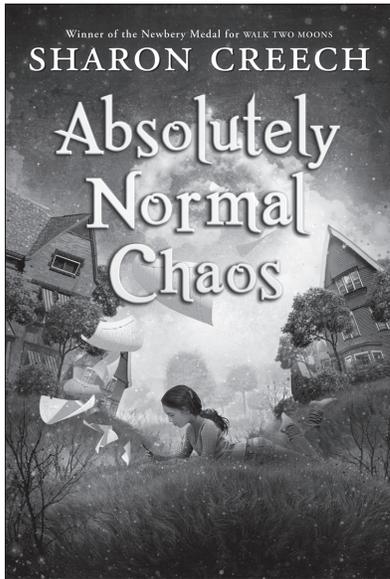


ABSOLUTELY NORMAL CHAOS



Setting the Scene

Mary Lou Finney is less than excited about her assignment to keep a journal over the summer. But then cousin Carl Ray comes to stay with her family, and what starts out as the dull dog days of summer quickly turns into the wildest roller coaster ride of all time. How was Mary Lou supposed to know what would happen with Carl Ray and the ring? Or with her boy-crazy best friend, Beth Ann? Or with the permanently pink Alex Cheevey? Suddenly, a boring school project becomes a record of the most incredible, unbelievable summer of Mary Lou's life.

Before Reading

Absolutely Normal Chaos begins with a letter from Mary Lou to her teacher, Mr. Birkway, begging him not to read her summer journals. Ask the class if they have ever kept a journal. Would they like their teacher reading it? Why or why not?

Discussion Questions

1. Describe Mary Lou's relationship with Alex Cheevey. What is their relationship like at the start of the novel? How does it change? Why? What do you imagine their relationship is like after the book ends?
2. When Mary Lou is lamenting the end of the school year, she writes, "Isn't that just typical? You wait and wait and wait for something, and then when it happens, you feel sad" (p. 8). Are there other examples of this in the novel? What are they?
3. Mary Lou refers to an unexpected sad event as a "snapper" (p. 161). Why does she call it that? What events in the book are "snappers"? Why?
4. Throughout her journals, Mary Lou takes notes about the *Odyssey*, a book she's reading for school. Are any of the characters in the *Odyssey* like people in Mary Lou's life? What does Carl Ray mean when he says the *Odyssey* is a metaphor? A metaphor for what?
5. Near the end of the summer Mary Lou writes, "I don't even recognize myself when I read back over these pages" (p. 228). In what ways has Mary Lou changed over the course of the novel? Is she more mature? Why? Provide examples from the book.
6. When Mary Lou describes the idea of the "wheel of fortune," she writes, "Already, I'm worrying that I'm too happy, and I'm either going to have to pay for this or it's all going to end real soon" (p. 114). What does Mary Lou mean by this? Are there instances in the book that verify this theory?
7. In what ways does Mary Lou grow as a writer over the course of the summer? What different types of writing elements does she use in her journals?
8. How does Mary Lou feel when she visits Carl Ray's family? How is his family like the Finneys? How are they different? Why doesn't Mary Lou tell her brother what it's like at Carl Ray's before he goes to visit?



