

BOOK CLUB
GUIDEWHAT GIRLS
ARE MADE OF

ELANA K. ARNOLD

National Book Award Finalist

★ “Arnold interweaves myriad landscapes, from the parched affluence of California neighborhoods to the ordered sadness of a high-kill animal shelter where Nina volunteers . . . into a narrative wholeness that is greater than its parts. Unflinchingly candid, unapologetically girl, and devastatingly vital.”—*Kirkus Reviews*, Starred Review

ABOUT THE BOOK

Sixteen-year-old Nina isn't made of sugar and spice and everything nice. She is flesh and blood and desire, but she longs to know real love. Unconditional love. The kind her mother told her doesn't exist.

Reeling from a shameful breakup with a boy she unabashedly worshipped, Nina drifts between school and her days volunteering at a dog shelter. But she's looking for something more. A way to fix her mistakes. Unsure of how to move on, Nina peels back the moments that have shaped her and given her a view of girlhood distorted by violence and sacrifice. One that led her to do something unspeakable to a fellow student.



As Nina grapples with regret, strange memories of a trip to Italy with her mother start to surface. Layer by layer, Elana K. Arnold reveals their painful effect, and questions what love really means.

Raw, emotional writing and a frank portrayal of the world teen girls live in set this award-winning book apart as a stunning chronicle of self-acceptance.

BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION

- “When I was fourteen, my mother told me there was no such thing as unconditional love” is the first sentence in the novel, and is a recurring line throughout the book. Define unconditional. What does this reveal about Nina’s mother’s view of relationships? Explain what Nina’s mother means when she says, “I could stop loving you at any time” (p. 2).
- Why is her mother unwilling to qualify her statement? Debate whether there are conditions to Nina’s mother’s love for her. How does Nina come to realize that her mother’s words were a “warning, a gift, a benediction”? Explain why, at the end of the novel, Nina’s mother denies ever telling her “there is no such thing as unconditional love.”
- What is the difference between a house and a home? Nina describes her house as a mausoleum. What does this reveal about her family? Point out the times Nina appears to seem lonely in her own home.

- In middle school, Nina accompanies her mother to Italy. What does Nina learn about her mother on this trip? Discuss why her mother is so fascinated by the martyr saints. What is the significance of the Ecstasy of Saint Teresa sculpture? Nina's mother allows her to get drunk on wine. How does her mother rationalize the decision? Explain the reaction of other people in the restaurant. At the end of the novel, Nina tells Bekah that she thinks her mother is an alcoholic. Why does it take so long for Nina to say this out loud?
- Nina is doing community service at the high-kill shelter because of an unfortunate incident she committed at school. Explain why the details of the incident aren't revealed until late in the book. How does Nina's attempt to apologize to Apollonia show growth in her character? Why does Nina continue working at the shelter when her time of service is complete? Discuss how working at the shelter causes Nina to further explore conditions of love.
- Describe Nina's relationship with Seth. She is aware that his love for her has conditions. How is she blinded by these conditions? Debate whether he really loves her. Seth gives Nina a vibrator. Why does the gift make her feel "shame"? How does the gift confirm one of the conditions of their relationship? Nina goes to a Planned Parenthood clinic for birth control, but gets pregnant anyway. Why doesn't she tell Seth that she is pregnant?
- Seth takes Nina to the Bridge to Nowhere. How is the trip about conditions? How does Nina describe the music that plays at the bridge? Discuss how the music defines what people are searching for when they go to the bridge. Nina returns to the Bridge to Nowhere at the end of the novel. What is symbolic about her return?
- Discuss Nina's friendship with Louise. How did their relationship change when Seth starting noticing Nina? Louise and Nina see a Wishbone Doll on the Internet. Explain the connection that Nina draws between the doll and the Dissected Graces that she saw in Italy. Debate whether Louise's reaction is the same as Nina's. Nina is told that someone must be with her when she takes the pills to end her pregnancy. Why does Nina choose Bekah, a girl from the shelter, instead of Louise? What does Bekah contribute to Nina's growth?
- Nina calls her literary form project "Conditions." Why doesn't she turn it in when she knows that she has done excellent work? Explain what she means when she says, "I think Mr. Whitbey isn't the right audience" (p. 172). Who is her audience? How is the project a summary of her personal journey? Discuss how Seth and the literary form project cause Nina to think about her role in a relationship. Why does she offer her English project to Apollonia? Discuss Apollonia's reaction.
- Discuss the structure of the novel. How do the four parts advance the plot, and reveal Nina's growth as a young woman? What is the purpose of the stories of the martyr saints? How do their stories contribute to Nina's journey as a woman? The novel ends with the following sentence: "I am more than my mother's daughter." Draw a connection between the first and last sentences of the book. What does the novel say about how society has traditionally defined women's roles? How might today's generation of young women change that view?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ELANA K. ARNOLD writes books for and about children and teens. Her books have received a Michael L. Printz Honor, been Junior Library Guild selections and on the Bank Street Best Book list, and named to the YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults list. She holds a master's degree in Creative Writing/Fiction from the University of California, Davis, and currently lives in Huntington Beach, California, with her husband, two children, and a menagerie of animals.