

A Reader's Guide for

How Not To Be Popular

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Reading Group Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. **Maggie has attended ten high schools and is skilled at "...figuring out the cliques and the power rankings just by noticing the way kids dress and act" (13). Upon arriving at her new school in Austin, Texas, she proceeds to confidently classify the entire school population, labeling them as if illustrating the overlapping aspects of "Venn diagrams" (14). Maggie observes the "Bippies," the cheerleader/dance squad types and the highly-ranked social group she typically identifies with. She says, "In the past I would have tried to join this crowd as a hanger on — you know, those celebrity-assistant types who get to share in the spoils" (17).**

Questions: Are Maggie's perceptions of "power rankings" reality? What kind of power is she referring to? Are there social groups that rank higher on the charts than others? Is this hierarchical ranking fair? Who made up these rules? What are the benefits of possessing social power? Do you have to be perceived as being socially powerful before you can possess personal power? Who makes these power rules? What do Maggie's harsh judgments about kids she's never met say about her nature? Where does she typically rank in the social strata food chain? What does Maggie mean by the comment "...those celebrity-assistant types who get to share in the spoils"? What are the spoils? Would you want to share in the spoils? Explain your answer.

2. **When the Bippies mock Maggie's clothes she says, "As much as I don't like it, I do understand. I've done the catty, behind-your-back talk myself at other schools. It's sort of standard behavior if you want to be part of the in-crowd—a way of constantly reminding people that you're on top" (41). She also says, "Plus they act like they're better—an attitude I usually try to copy" (112).**

Questions: Is this sort of behavior synonymous with the notion of being "better than" someone? How does this notion play itself out as part of the novel's theme? With Maggie? Penny? Miles? Jack? Caitlyn? Shanna? Why do people need to be reminded

that “you’re on top”? What if they forget? What if they assumed that all people are equal and deserving of respect? If this were the case, what would happen to the school’s social structure? Would that be a good thing? Could it ever happen? Should it?

- 3. Regarding Penny’s character, Maggie says that she is “...so unapologetic and matter-of-fact that I have to smile. It amazes me how blank faced she is about everything...” (44). And “She’s obviously one of the school’s bottom feeders. And besides, it’s not like she could ever seriously be my friend” (108). Maggie also states that “...it’s pretty obvious she has no idea about the rules of popularity” (112).**

***Questions:** Are these comments about Penny true? Is she blank? Is she clueless? Is there any real depth to her? Explain. What does Maggie mean by the term “bottom feeders”? Do others see her in this way? Do you think Penny considers herself a bottom feeder? Why doesn’t Maggie think that she and Penny could ever be friends? Does Penny think of Maggie as a friend (note page 242)? Can you think of a time when Penny demonstrated more honor and inner strength than Maggie? Do you think Penny is aware of her status within the school’s social hierarchy? Has she ever suffered emotional blows because of power ranking rules? Is everybody aware of these rules? Do the rules affect all aspects of school life? How so? Do they affect your life? How do you handle this?*

- 4. When the Bippies discover Maggie at the pool she thinks “...I wonder if they see me as another Penny. It upsets me a little to think so, especially since I’m not *trying* to be weird right now” (52).**

***Questions:** Does Maggie think that her ploy to be unpopular is conditional under certain circumstances? Can social power rankings be switched on and off at will? Or are they static? Never changing? Are there neutral places, free of unrelenting social judgment? If so, where? Should there be some social no-nuke zones? Why was Maggie upset in this scene? Why should she care what the Bippies think of her? She wanted to be unpopular, didn’t she? Did Maggie want the Bippies to see her as another “bottom feeder,” or is that going a little too far? Is she beginning to lose control? Should she?*

- 5. “I suppose under my new antipopularity plan, it doesn’t really matter if I seem like a freak. But I’d rather not feel like one” (57).**

***Questions:** Does Maggie think that she’ll be able to pull off this deceptive scheme with no emotional cost? Should she be able to? Who is she hurting, anyway? Why should she care? Maggie is used to being in control, being “better than” most others, a judge of social power standings. Is she losing her power? Is she losing control? What about “The Stabbies”? What are those related to? Are they a consequence of her behavior? When do they start occurring? When do they stop? Why is that so?*

6. **“A whole row of my parents’ shirts are facing me, their arms stretched out as if waiting for a hug. I abruptly turn away” (59).**

Questions: Analyze this metaphor. What do the shirts represent? Why so many shirts? Who do the shirts symbolize? What does her act of turning away represent? What is she missing by turning away? What is the consequence for doing so? Later in the story Jack lends Maggie his shirt (94). What does that act say about his role in the story? Does Maggie return Jack’s shirt to him? How is the shirt used to symbolize their relationship?

7. **On page 86, Jack tells Maggie, “...you aren’t all that good at fitting in.” Conversely, Miles tells Maggie, “You act like you’re too good for everyone, but you hang out with those weirdo kids.” When Maggie suggests that she might be a weirdo Miles exclaims, “No you aren’t. And you know it” (240).**

Questions: How does each of these boys perceive Maggie’s outcast endeavors? Compare the characterization of Miles and Jack. In what ways are the two boys similar? Contrast them. How are they different? Which boy has more social power? Which one maintains a sense of integrity? What is integrity? Consider Maggie’s emotional connection with the two boys. Which boy widens Maggie’s perception of life? Is she “better than” either of them? How so? How do her relationships with Miles and Jack differ from the one she had with Trevor? Which relationship appeals to you? Why?

8. **Consider the oxymoron title of Chapter 4, “Artificial Life” (63). In this chapter Maggie carries a potted rosemary plant with her to school. Rosie comments that she “...never could get that Corsican mint to grow in Oregon” (71) and that she desires to leave a “happy mark” wherever she goes. And, lastly, Maggie reminisces about the time when she and Trevor carved their names into a Douglas fir. “At first I didn’t want him to do it...Now I’m glad we did it. I guess we left our mark too. The trees were witness” (72).**

Questions: Chapter 4 is rich with paradoxical contradiction and plant life metaphors. Consider the chapter title “Artificial Life.” The term “artificial” meaning false, an imitation, not genuine or natural, and “life” meaning a source of vitality, liveliness, reality, or nature. Also consider the proverb, “Bloom where you are planted.” What aspects of Maggie’s life are artificial? Which aspects represent life? What is the significance of Maggie’s taking something living, the rosemary plant, with her to school as she pursues her artificial plan of existence? What is the significance of Rosie’s comment about the mint plant, that it grows best in Austin? What is the metaphor here? Did Trevor and Maggie leave a “happy mark” on the Douglas fir tree, or did they leave a scar? Compare the symbolism of the trees as witnesses and the row of shirts hanging with their arms breezing toward her. Who do the trees symbolize? Consider the rest of the chapter titles. Which oxymoron leaves an indelible impression on you?

9. After Maggie tried to humiliate herself in Jack's eyes she wonders, "Why is he still being nice to me? Isn't he worried about his own reputation? Seems like he can't afford to lose cool points" (107).

Questions: What are "cool points"? How would being with Maggie cause Jack to lose cool points? Do the majority of high school kids relate to one another on this level? Do cool points really matter? How are they valuable? Are they exchangeable? Can you barter with cool points? If so, when? Where? How? Are cool points synonymous with "power ranking"? If so, how? Who controls the distribution of cool points? Who is the judge? How does one earn the honor of serving as the cool point judge? By what scale are cool points evaluated? Who has more cool points—Penny or Drip? Penny or Caitlyn? Caitlyn or Shanna? Miles or Jack? Miles or Trevor? Chip in high school or Chip as a grown up? Why? What is your "cool point" ranking? Do you even care?

10. Shanna asks Maggie not to tell anyone that she buys second-hand clothes. "Who'd listen to me anyway?" answers Maggie. "Look at who you are and look at who I am" (129).

Questions: How often do kids surrender their personal power in this way? Does this comment have to do with power ranking or cool points? How so? Why does Maggie agree to help Shanna? What's in it for her? How does keeping Shanna's secret advance her plan to maintain an unpopular status? If Maggie were a Bippy, do you think she'd respond to Shanna in this same way? Why or why not?

11. Maggie's tangled ploy unravels when the school newspaper writes the article about her, the one that she has paradoxically filled with lies and misperceptions. A girl comments, "They love how real you are. It's true what you said about the Bippies. How they tell people how to act and how fake they are all the time" (230). Maggie responds by thinking, "She has the nerve to call me fun and authentic and totally natural" (231).

Questions: Is Maggie "real"? How is it that she understands Bippy motivation so well? How is the newspaper article contradictory? Paradoxical? When has Maggie been fun? Authentic? Totally natural? Ever? Is Maggie an oxymoron personified? If so, how?

12. When Penny's kind, humble, and generous nature is revealed, Maggie is astonished and comments, "Wow...that was really nice of you, Penny" (242). In response, Penny's ears turn red, she stares at the floor and pants. Then she straightens up and says, "Maggie was nominated for homecoming queen!"

Questions: What kind of a person is Penny? Her reddened ears and quickness of breath are physical reactions to her emotional response of the moment. What is going on inside of Penny? Why is she acting this way? Don't most people want to be noticed when they

do something nice? Are there times when people do nice things with the intention of being noticed? Can kindness be a form of manipulation? Is manipulation Penny's motivation to be kind? If person is humble, are they weak? Are humble people "bottom feeders"? Did Maggie do anything worthy of being praised? Why did Penny praise Maggie?

- 13. Shanna apologizes to Maggie by saying, "I'm sorry for all that stuff Caitlyn's doing...She's just...really threatened by you...Because you're real and people love that" (259).**

Questions: If real or authentic people are loved, why do Bippies constantly engage in judgment, deception, and malice? Are Bippies the only people who respond to threatening social situations in this manner? What about the principal's reaction to Maggie's clothes? Why is Maggie's "authenticity" threatening to someone as highly socially ranked as Caitlyn? Why would a Bippy be worried about a "loser's" stature? What do people do when they are threatened? When their sense of self is endangered? How does a person normally react when an insect, or bottom feeder, threatens their space? Why is this so?

- 14. At the Helping Hands dance, Maggie is "nestled together perfectly" (286) in Jack's arms when she tells him "...this is the best dance I've ever been to." She goes on to explain, "It's the truth. I've never experienced such all-out, fluttery fun. I'll bet there are sparkles in my aura" (287).**

Questions: How can it be that Maggie could be so happy while assuming the role of a social outcast? Can losers have fun? Maggie says that she has "never" experienced this kind of fun. Never? Ever? In the past she has aligned herself with Bippy-types. Could that be why she's never allowed herself to have fun like this? Can Bippy life be emotionally limiting? How so? At this moment, is Maggie being "real"? Is this an emotional expression of her authentic self? Wouldn't she like things to stay this way? What would she have to do to remain this happy? What would you do?

- 15. Maggie says, "When I started this school, I avoided these girls [the Bippies] and their scene because I didn't want to make any friends. So I joined the Helping Hands — the 'loser' club. But *these* people are the real losers. *These* are the ones I won't be sad to leave. If only I had chosen them" (292).**

Questions: Like the flip of a switch, Maggie shifts her friendship allegiance from the Helping Hands to the Bippies. What motivated this change in her? What does this say about Maggie's character? What kind of person is she...really? Selfish? Shallow? Self absorbed? What is the definition of being self absorbed? Absorbed in self? Who will

benefit from this change in Maggie? Who will be hurt? If she is a true Bippy at heart, will she even care? Would you?

- 16. Maggie stares into the Helping Hands' "...shiny, joyful faces." They think she is the "...awesomest girl ever." She says, "They've made me feel welcome and happy and included. But I can't let them do that to me anymore" (294).**

Questions: Maggie cruelly turns on the Helping Hands, especially on loyal Penny. Have you witnessed a situation like this one? Have you participated in one? Have you turned on someone? Has someone ever turned on you? Describe the incident. Normally the statement "can't let them do that to me anymore" is made when someone is being treated badly. Not so in this case. Is this a contradictory, paradoxical, or authentic response to the situation? Explain.

- 17. Maggie is standing with her new pals listening to Bree's retelling of the stolen Ho Ho and becomes aware that "...Caitlyn rose to fame by doing just about any wild thing that would earn attention." Bree remarks, "Caitlyn can be so mean" (296).**

Questions: Isn't Bree being mean now? Is being mean a Bippy prerequisite? A prerequisite to being popular? Conversely, is being nice synonymous with being unpopular? Hasn't Maggie been "doing just about any wild thing that would earn attention"? Compare Caitlyn's and Maggie's characters. Any similarities there? When the Helping Hands were Maggie's pals, did they degrade one another? Verbally accost each other's character? Which relationship is authentic? Which is paradoxical? Which would you prefer? Why?

- 18. Maggie observes during the Homecoming Pep Rally that Caitlyn "...sashays to the front to lukewarm applause. A couple of people even boo. It's such an obvious display of hostility that I really feel bad for her" (327).**

Questions: Why would the crowd boo Caitlyn if she is popular? How can this be? What about her "cool points"? Has she lost some of them? Does she still maintain her social power ranking? Why does Maggie feel bad for Caitlyn? Why the shift in her character? What caused it? Why a sense of compassion instead of disdain? How do you feel about the crowd's reaction to Caitlyn? Do you feel bad for her, too? Is she getting what she deserves? Do you think that Caitlyn will ever change? If she wanted to change, how could she? How would people respond to her?

- 19. An emotional shift takes place in Maggie when she says, "I start crying again, but this time it's different. It's worse. I'm not crying because I hurt. I'm crying because I hurt them" (316).**

Questions: An “epiphany” occurs when a character has an intuitive revelation and suddenly sees things as they really are. Consider Maggie’s altered perceptions of Penny (329). Is Maggie experiencing an epiphany in this moment? How so? Explain the significance of this observation in regard to Maggie’s character development. Maggie’s perception of Shanna also changes (257-258), as well as her awareness of her parents’ sincere affection for her (319-320). What is happening within Maggie? Could it be that she has begun to understand the emotional severity of her actions? How so? Has she come to see the true nature of the people surrounding her and of herself? Explain your answer. Have you ever had an epiphany similar to Maggie’s? If so, how were your perceptions of another person changed? How did this awareness change you?

20. In the end, Maggie says, “So that’s it. I might be friendless and unpopular, but at least I’ve told the truth...and I’ve never felt more real” (331).

Questions: Maggie has found her authentic self and is truly happy. Are you? Are there things that you would like to change about yourself? If so, what might that be? Where will you start? When will you begin? Now?

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Teacher Note. The questions and writing prompts included in this Reading Guide are aligned with the following TEKS:

110.18.B: Students analyze, make inferences and draw conclusions about the author's purpose in cultural, historical, and contemporary contexts and provide evidence from the text to support their understanding. Students are expected to compare and contrast the stated or implied purposes of different authors writing on the same topic.

110.19.B.3: Students analyze, make inferences and draw conclusions about theme and genre in different cultural, historical, and contemporary contexts and provide evidence from the text to support their understanding.

110.19.B.6.b: Students understand, make inferences and draw conclusions about the structure and elements of fiction and provide evidence from text to support their understanding.

110.19.B.16: Students write about their own experiences. Students are expected to write a personal narrative that has a clearly defined focus and communicates the importance of or reasons for actions and/or consequences.

110.19.B.18: Students write persuasive texts to influence the attitudes or actions of a specific audience on specific issues.

110.19.B.18.b: Students are expected to write a persuasive essay includes evidence that is logically organized to support the author's viewpoint and that differentiates between fact and opinion.

110.20.B.6.b: Analyze linear plot developments (e.g., conflict, rising action, falling action, resolution, subplots) to determine whether and how conflicts are resolved.

110.20.B.18.b: Students are expected to write a persuasive essay to the appropriate audience that: considers and responds to the views of others and anticipates and answers reader concerns and counter-arguments.