

Little Universes Discussion Guide

ABOUT THE BOOK:

Heather Demetrios' *Little Universes* is about the powerful bond between sisters, the kinds of love that never die, and the journey we all must make through the baffling cruelty and unexpected beauty of human life in an incomprehensible universe.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Hannah describes her struggle with sobriety like this: "They say *you're clean*, but then why do I still feel so dirty all the time? There is no *clean*. Not for girls like me." Why do you think Hannah feels this way about herself? What does she mean "girls like me"?
2. When Mae sees River on the train, they talk about Hannah's addiction, losing loved ones, and letting go. River says "We cling to the things and people we love because we think they are the source of happiness and light and life for us. But this isn't true. It can't be. Because nothing and no one lasts forever." Mae resists this notion, feeling that River is telling her to give up on her sister, but River insists that it's about giving up the illusion of control—recognizing that you can't control someone else's path or the choices they make once on it. What do you think about this conversation? Do River's words resonate with you, or do you disagree with them?
3. Hannah is inspired by Yoko Ono and her book *Acorn*. Throughout *Little Universes*, Hannah writes her own acorns, leaving them in places people can find. Which of Hannah's acorns stands out to you? Why?
4. After her father's death, Hannah reads his emails and realizes he was cheating on her mother with his research assistant. This complicates her grief, infusing it with anger and betrayal. To protect Mae from these feelings, Hannah decides to hide the affair from her sister. Have you ever been put in a position where you had to choose between telling the truth, or lying to save someone from hurt? What did you do?
5. Mae struggles with feelings about her adoption in the aftermath of the tsunami. At her parents' funeral, she overhears someone saying that she wasn't *really* their daughter. At the same time, Hannah feels that Mae must've been better loved because their parents chose her, while they got "stuck" with Hannah. Where do you think these fears come from for Mae and for Hannah? What do they reveal about their relationships with their parents?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED:

6. Mae and Hannah have inherited from their mother the tradition of making soup in times of crisis. Mae thinks, “When you’re making soup, all you need to think about is chopping and pouring and slicing and stirring. And you can’t mess it up, not really. It’s not like baking, where you have to consider thermodynamics and its effect on various chemical compounds. Baking is science. Soup—maybe soup is art. To make it, you have to engage the right side of your brain. Your imagination. And you need to engage all five senses, not just sight. You give the left side of your brain a break—the logic part of it.” Does this make sense to you, as a coping mechanism? Do you feel like different parts of your brain work differently? Do you feel differently when you are creating art (or making soup), than when you are thinking about science or logic?

7. After Drew helps save Hannah from an overdose, Mae defends his right to be in the hospital, over her family’s objections. This is a major moment for her. As she describes it: “I feel the shift, then. The moment when I truly step over into adulthood, when everything I say doesn’t get to be up for debate. They feel it, too. This night, it has burned away whatever remained of my childhood. That’s done now. I am the commander of my own life.” Have you had a moment like this in your own life, where you felt you had truly crossed over from childhood to adulthood? What was it like? And if not, can you imagine a moment like this in your future?

8. The book includes an excerpt from an interview in which Mae and Hannah’s father, a scientist, is quoted saying, “I’ve always felt scientists and the faithful have more in common than we’ve ever given ourselves a chance to see. At the end of the day, we’re asking many of the same questions.” Does this ring true to you or not? Do you think that religious faith and scientific belief in the existence of things that cannot be seen are similar? Why or why not?

9. “Do right by the miracle” becomes something of a refrain for Hannah and Drew. What does that mean to you?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Heather Demetrios is a critically acclaimed author and writing coach. Her novels include *I'll Meet You There*, *Bad Romance*, and *Exquisite Captive*. She is the recipient of the PEN New England Susan P. Bloom Discovery Award for her debut novel, *Something Real*, which is not at all impressive to her cat or imaginary friends.

