

Reading Group Guide

A Reading Group Guide to

Maybe a Fox

By Kathi Appelt and Alison McGhee

About the Book

Sylvie and Jules, Jules and Sylvie. Better than just sisters, better than best friends, they'd be identical twins if only they'd been born in the same year. And if only Sylvie wasn't such a fast—faster than fast—runner. But Sylvie is too fast, and when she runs to the river they're not supposed to go anywhere near to throw a wish rock just before the school bus comes on a snowy morning, she runs so fast that no one sees what happens . . . and no one ever sees her again. Jules is devastated, but she refuses to believe what all the others believe, that—like their mother—her sister is gone forever.

At the very same time, in the shadow world, a shadow fox is born—half of the spirit world, half of the animal world. She too is fast—faster than fast—and she senses danger. She's too young to know exactly what she senses, but she knows something is very wrong. And when Jules believes one last wish rock for Sylvie needs to be thrown into the river, the human and shadow worlds collide.

Writing in alternate voices—one Jules's, the other the fox's—Kathi Appelt and Alison McGhee tell the searingly beautiful tale of one small family's moment of heartbreak, a moment that unfolds into one that is epic, mythic, shimmering, and most of all, hopeful.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the significance of Sylvie's Flo-Jo T-shirt? Why is it important to Sylvie? Is it important to Jules? Explain.
2. Sylvie and Jules are very different characters. Make a list of characteristics for each girl. Then discuss which features make the two sisters seem similar or different.
3. How does Sylvie's running affect Jules and her relationship with her sister?
4. Memories are an important aspect to this story. Even though Jules and Sylvie lived through certain events together, Jules felt Sylvie remembered the events differently. Why would the memories of Jules' and Sylvie's mother be different for each girl? Are some memories suppressed? Can memories change over time?
5. Jules loves collecting rocks and sorting them into categories—igneous, sedimentary, and metamorphic—and she also adds a new category: wish rocks. Describe a wish rock and the importance of them to Jules. What is the process for using a wish rock? Do

wish rocks work? Support your answer using examples from the story. Of all the wish rocks thrown into the river, why is Sylvie's chosen and not Zeke's, or Zeke's grandmother's?

6. Jules and Sylvie's dad has a list of Do Nots that each sister knows by heart. Do you think the list is reasonable? What do the girls think? Do they always follow the rules? How do the girls get around some of their dad's Do Nots? Is "making snow families in your pajamas" on the list? What does their father say to them to make sure they are paying attention to him? Do other families have Do Not lists? Discuss some of the rules in your own family. Are they similar or different? Whose Do Not list would you prefer?

7. What influence does "The Legend of the River Brothers" have on Jules? Why is this legend important? How does it compare to Jules and Sylvie's story?

8. When Sylvie goes to the Slip, Jules starts to play the Maybe game. What is the game and what is its purpose? Why doesn't Jules want to play it without Sylvie? Foreshadowing is a literary technique used to indicate or warn of a future event. How is this technique used in the story?

9. Jules and Sylvie describe Sam Porter as Super Friend Sam. Discuss the relationship between these friends. As the story progresses, how does the relationship between Jules and Sam change?

10. When Elk goes away to Afghanistan he gives Jules two nearly identical agates. He asks Jules, the rock girl, to find the Grotto and to put the rocks in the Grotto if he and Zeke do not return. What is so important about the Grotto? Does she follow through with his request?

11. As Jules searches for Sylvie, a mother fox anxiously awaits the spirit of her unborn daughter. When the spirit arrives, the mother fox hears her ancestors whisper "Kennen." What is a Kennen? What is the purpose of the Kennen in this story? How often were Kennens around?

12. Elk spent a great deal of his time wandering the woods. What was he doing all day? How important was the woods to him? Refer to the book for examples of activities the children did in the woods. Would you enjoy doing these same activities?

13. When Sylvie's tracks become a gash, a gash that shoots straight into Whippoorwill and disappears into the Slip, how do you feel? Do you understand what has happened? Discuss the author's use of descriptive vocabulary in this scene to evoke emotion.

14. What are some of the ways, however unusual, that Jules tries to cope with her grief?

15. What is the "After Sylvie" time like for Jules? Does this time help her cope with her loss? Why do you think that some people talk to a person who has died? Elk caught Jules talking to Sylvie. What did he tell her about himself? Was Elk missing Zeke? Does

he have an “After Zeke” time?

16. After talking with Elk, Jules feels a pull—a pull that would take her into the woods. She wonders if this is a burning wish. What makes her want to go into the woods? Why is it so important to her?

17. When Sam drops off Jules’s homework he tells her the exciting news that a catamount has been spotted. Seeing a catamount was Sam’s burning wish before he changed it wishing to bring Elk home safely. Why does this news upset Jules so much? Does she mean to make Sam feel bad? Do you think life is fair?

18. How does Senna know she needs to make contact with Jules? What draws her to Jules?

19. Jules is upset when she thinks of her father and Sylvie’s ritual to remember her mother. Do you think it’s a good thing to have rituals? Why is Jules so sad thinking about this ritual? What is her father’s solution? Do you agree with his solution, or can you think of a better one?

20. Senna knows things that even Mother Fox does not know. What does Senna see around her? Why does this worry Senna’s mother? Who else, besides Senna, is in this above world for a particular purpose?

21. Sam loved the name, *catamount*. What did he think the name meant? What is a catamount? Is it real or imagined? Where would you find one? Why was the news of a catamount so important to Sam? How did Senna know that the catamount was not a threat to her or her family?

22. On the day Jules returns to school, she spots a fox. What does her dad tell her about the sighting? Is it as hard for her father to send Jules off to school as it is for her to attend? Use examples from the book to defend your answer.

23. How does Sam prove his friendship to Jules on the first day of school? Discuss how Sam is grieving for Sylvie, and even his brother Elk. How is Elk, even though he came home from Afghanistan, not entirely the same brother Sam knew before he went to war? Does anyone help Sam with his grief?

24. The story takes place in Vermont, which is known for its wilderness. How did Jules and Sylvie feel about the woods surrounding their property? How well did the girls know their woods? What did Mrs. Harless mean when she called Jules, Sylvie and Sam “woodland creatures”?

25. What is the climax of the story? How do the authors coordinate the characters to make the animal world and the human world collide?

26. Why can’t Jules hear anyone calling to her as she runs to the Slip with her burning wish rock? Could this also be the reason why Sylvie didn’t see the tree root in the

snow?

27. As Senna departs from the above world and lets herself fall, a Someone waits to catch her. Who is this Someone? Is this the same Someone who is in the Grotto?

28. Mother Fox had known before birth that Senna is a Kennen. Even with this knowledge, do you think she was prepared for Senna's sacrifice? What is her reaction?

29. Sylvie places her mother's flamingo mug in the Grotto as a way to honor her mother. Jules brought the chunk of marble—the one Sylvie gave to her, warm to her touch, smooth on one side and coarse on the other like Sylvie—to the Grotto, in honor of Sylvie. What does this touching moment reveal about Jules?

Extension Activities

1. Divide students into small groups, and have each group describe Sylvie's characteristics from the point of view of Jules, Chess Sherman, Sam, Liz, and Elk. Compare and contrast the characteristics from each point of view.

2. The story is set in Vermont. Vermont's state rocks are marble, slate and granite. Research other states to learn what their state rocks are. Then determine what type of rocks they are: igneous, sedimentary, or metamorphic. Compare the states to see if they all have the three different categories of rocks. Do some states have only one rock? If possible bring in a sample of each type of rock for the group to examine.

3. Research Florence Griffith Joyner. How was she as an athlete? Consider why Sylvie wanted to be like Flo-Jo. Research other famous female runners.

4. Mrs. Harless's property was marked by rock cairns. What does that mean? What are cairns? Research different types of cairns and their purposes. If possible, try making a small cairn out of found rocks.

5. After the group has finished reading *Maybe a Fox*, have them write the next chapter. Possible topics could be:

Does Jules take Elk to the Grotto and leave the agates in honor of Zeke?

What happens to the hunter—does anyone prosecute him for negligence of a firearm?

Does the catamount sacrifice his life for Elk or possibly Sam?

Does Liz Redding break any running records for the school?

Does Jules develop a ritual to help her remember Senna?

Does Jules continue collecting rocks?

Are there more Do Nots added to Jules's list? The possibilities are endless; let the creative process take over!

6. Try making a snow family, if possible. If there is good packing snow it will be easy to do. If not, try using shaved ice to make the snow and mold a family out of it. Who would be included in the family? What is a family? Were Jules and her father a family? Would Jules add a fox to her snow family?

7. It was implied that many of the rocks in the Grotto came from places far away, brought by the Vikings, Norsemen, and Native Americans such as the Abenaki Indians of Vermont. Research the Abenaki Indian tribe to learn more. Compare this Native American tribe to one near you. How are they similar and how are they different?

8. Have you ever walked or hiked through the woods, or a wooded area? What is your first impression? Next time you walk through the woods, look more closely to see its wonders, such as the type of bark on a tree or its different shades. The woods may even look different depending on the season. In the summer, look for a rotting log and roll it over. What do you see? In the winter, check the frost crystals. What type of birds exist in this environment? Do you see any animals?

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