

Literature Circle Guide to *So B. It* by Sarah Weeks

Book Summary

Heidi's life with her mentally disabled mother and their doting neighbor, Bernadette, is happy, but filled with questions. Where did she and Mama come from before Bernadette found them living in the apartment next door? And what does Mama mean when she says "soof"? Heidi feels drawn to find answer to these questions. She only has a knack at being lucky, a driving will, and a notebook full of lists to help her succeed.

Author Information

Sarah Weeks is a singer, songwriter, and children's book author. She is the author of the successful middle-grade Guy series, including *Regular Guy*, *Guy Time*, *Guy Wire* and *My Guy*, which will soon be a feature film by Disney. She lives in New York City with her two sons.

Suggested answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. Heidi says she is "just plain lucky" when she guesses all of the pairs in the game Memory (pp. 14-16). List two other instances where Heidi shows she is lucky.
Heidi's luck helps her throughout her journey. One example is that she always wins when she plays the slot machines at the Sudsy Duck Laundromat at the corner (p. 16). Another example is when she arrives in Liberty with no money for the cab fare to get to Hilltop, and she is able to guess the exact number of jellybeans in the big jar to win a free ride from ABC Cab (p. 151-155).
2. Describe how Bernadette became a part of Heidi and Mama's life.
Bernadette heard a "pitiful sound" outside her door. She thought it was one of her cats. She opened the door and saw Mama holding Heidi, who was only about a week old, out in the rain. Mama walked into Bernadette's apartment and into her life forever. After Bernadette had cleaned up Heidi and made her a bottle, Mama carried Heidi down the hall to their apartment. Bernadette worried about them all day, but then she remembered an old door in her linen closet that connected the two apartments. "From that day forward Bernadette came and went through the old door..."(p. 24).
3. What does Thurman Hill think Heidi wants from him when he first meets her? Why is he angry?
Thurman Hill is angry with Heidi when he first meets her because he thinks she has come to get more money from him (p. 173). Later, Heidi learns that Thurman Hill has been paying their rent and bills ever since Mama became pregnant with Heidi and struck a bargain with Heidi's grandmother in exchange for their moving away (p. 217).

4. Describe why Bernadette can't go outside. What happens when she tries?

Bernadette suffers from agoraphobia, which is a crippling fear of open spaces (p. 8). She physically cannot leave her apartment and suffers horribly when she tries (p. 71).

5. Bernadette compares Mama's brain to a broken machine: "All the basic parts are there...but inside there are lots of mysterious little pieces busted or bent or missing altogether," she says (p. 5). Explain what Bernadette means.

Mama lives by different rules than Heidi and Bernadette. She shows emotions and she can learn simple tasks like how to open cans or make tea. Because she has been mentally disabled since birth, she isn't able to fully communicate or take care of herself in the way Heidi and Bernadette can.

6. When Heidi first meets Zander, she doesn't like him. Explain how they become friends and what Heidi comes to appreciate about him.

When Heidi first meets Zander, a little boy who lives in her building, he calls her a retard, so she proceeds to avoid him. Then one day, they cross paths and he offers her a Twinkie. They fall into a ritual where Zander shares junk food and stories with Heidi. Heidi likes the junk food—Bernadette doesn't allow it—and she likes listening to Zander's stories about his father the war hero, though she knows that he's lying about his family life.

7. Heidi's mama uses only 23 words, but she is often able to show what she wants or how she feels beyond those 23 words. Explain how Mama is able to communicate with Heidi and Bernadette.

When Mama is upset—like when the bus startles her (p. 43)—she cries and clutches at her chest. On the other hand, when she and Heidi have fun going to the supermarket to buy groceries and try free samples, she laughs and holds hands with Heidi to show she is happy (p. 42). Mama adds to her 23 words by physically showing her emotions.

8. When Heidi makes a list of what she knows about her mama, why does she only put one thing on it—the name So B. It (p.140)? What else could she add to that list?

Heidi explains she wasn't much of a list-maker back when she made the list about her mama. Later on, she realized she could have added all kinds of other things, such as her mama hated to wear socks, and rainy days made her anxious. When she first wrote this list, Heidi was looking for the kind of facts—like a birth date—that her mother was unable to give her.

9. Heidi hears her mother's word *soof* many times as she travels across country. She hears it when she opens the phone booth door in Cheyenne (p. 123) and in the wind when she gets to Liberty (p. 158). Why do you think she hears *soof* so often?

Heidi's mama's word *soof* is what first sparks Heidi's curiosity about her own past. She suspects the word is tied to a memory of her mama's. She tries to find answers, but her mama can't help her, and she begins to feel haunted by the word. One

might say she hears *soof* so often because it is her primary motivation for traveling to Liberty to try to answer the mysteries of her life.

10. Heidi first experiences lying when she realizes that Zander is “bending the truth to within an inch of its life” (p. 29). On the bus to Liberty, she tries lying herself. Why do you think Heidi lies about her family to Alice Wilinsky? How does she feel about her lies both before and after she gets caught?

Heidi learns her seatmate, Alice Wilinsky, is headed to Salt Lake City for a big family reunion. Heidi thinks to herself, “Listening to her go on and on about her own family had begun to make me feel even more acutely aware of all the things I didn’t know about my own” (p. 106). Initially, Heidi finds that embellishing her family makes her feel giddy. After Alice Wilinsky calls her on her lies and Heidi realizes Alice knew all along, Heidi feels awful. She makes a list in her notebook entitled “Things I Know About Lying,” and includes in it “Sometimes it’s easy to do” and “Sometimes if you’re not careful you start to believe your own lies” (p. 119-120).

11. How do you think things would have turned out differently for Heidi if Bernadette had convinced her not to go to Liberty? Do you think Heidi could have ever been satisfied if she didn’t try to find out about her past? Explain your answer.

Mama dies while Heidi is away in Liberty. Some students may feel it would have been better if Heidi were home when her mother passed away. They may feel Heidi would have been able to do something to help her mother, or at least would have been able to say goodbye properly. However, Heidi’s mother dies quite suddenly and peacefully in her sleep. Even if Heidi had been home, she probably would not have been able to prevent Mama’s death. Since Mama died in her sleep, Heidi would not have been able to say goodbye to her either. Heidi is so curious about her family history that she probably would not have been satisfied until she tried to solve the mystery of her past herself.

12. Why do you think Heidi decides not to stay with Ruby and Roy, but instead to return and live with Bernadette after Mama dies?

Ruby and Roy offer to let Heidi stay with them and live in the kind of classic family Heidi has not experienced in her life. She decides to return home to Bernadette instead because Bernadette is family to Heidi and, even though her mama has died, Reno is her home.

13. Imagine you are in Heidi’s place. What would it be like to grow up with Mama and Bernadette? Would you have more or less independence than you have now? What do you think would be challenging and what would be enjoyable?

Heidi’s situation allows her to be independent in some ways, such as being solely responsible for the grocery shopping and any other chores that take place outside of the apartment. In other ways, Heidi is sheltered because she doesn’t attend school outside the home and doesn’t socialize with other children except for Zander. Heidi’s unique family life allows her both more freedom and more limitations as compared to other kids her age.

14. Heidi makes a list of what she knows about her mama and she makes a list about what she knows about Georgia, whom she meets on the bus (pp. 138 and 140). Compare the two lists and explain why they are so different. Does Heidi really know more about Georgia than she does about her mama?

From talking to Georgia on the bus, Heidi is able to quickly learn many facts about her, including her birthday and her dog's name. When Heidi reflects on the kind of hard facts she knows about her mama, she is only able to think of her name, So B. It. Although Heidi knows few concrete facts about her mother, their life together has given her a deep understanding of Mama's soul and personality.

15. In Liberty, Heidi says she finally understands “there are some things in a person's life you just can't know” (p. 221). Explain how she has come to feel this way, as compared to earlier when she says to Bernadette, “A person has a right to know from the beginning” about her life (p. 39).

Early on, Heidi feels frustrated because she doesn't know *anything* about her life prior to Bernadette finding her and Mama. However, once Heidi goes to Hilltop and learns about her mother's life, she is able to make peace with the past.

Although Heidi now knows a part of the story of her life, she has matured and understands that certain aspects of her and Mama's lives will remain a mystery.

Note: These Literature Circle questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-6; Application: 7-8; Analysis: 9-10; Synthesis: 11-13; Evaluation: 14-15.

Activities

1. Both Heidi's mama and Bernadette use made-up words. *Soof* is Mama's word for love. Bernadette uses the word *rimple* to describe when Heidi's mama gets frustrated. Brainstorm a list of five original words. Then decide what each word will mean. Will it be a feeling, an idea, or a thing? Write down your definition next to each word. Now trade new-word lists and explain to your partner how you decided on each word.

Invite your class to discuss how Bernadette and Mama use the words *rimple* and *soof* respectively. Have the class suggest new words and write a few on the board. Ask the class to think about the sound of a new word and figure out what it might mean. Once you have modeled the exercise for the class, invite each student to construct a list of five new words and their meanings.

2. Heidi keeps a book of lists. She makes a list of what she knows about her mama and one about Georgia from the bus. Pick another major character from the book (such as Heidi, Bernadette, Zander, Ruby, or Thurman Hill) and make a list of everything you know about him or her.

Ask your class to recall characters from the book. Write the characters' names on the board and review the role each one played in the story. Students can select from the list of characters and use their book for support as they make a list of everything they know about their selected characters.

3. Heidi's mama only uses 23 words, but she is able to communicate what she needs and how she feels. For instance, when she offers tea to Heidi, she is also offering comfort. Imagine you could only use 23 words. Make a list of what words you would use and explain your choices. Would you be able to use the same word for more than one purpose?

Have students brainstorm the kinds of messages they communicate during the course of a day. You may start by having students suggest different interactions during which they must communicate (items on the list may include meals at home, class time, and talking with friends). Invite each student to create a list of 23 words and revise as necessary. Students may pair off and attempt to have a conversation only using the words they have listed.