

Literature Circle Guide to
ABSOLUTELY NORMAL CHAOS by Sharon Creech

Book Summary

Mary Lou Finney is less than excited about her assignment to keep a journal over the summer. Then, cousin Carl Ray comes to stay with her family. At first, Mary Lou is disappointed with Carl Ray. She thinks he is lazy and not very interesting. While Carl Ray gets settled, Mary Lou records the events of her everyday life in her journal. Her friend Beth Ann has been invited to join a secret club, a cute boy named Alex invites her to go swimming, and a neighbor with a mysterious relationship to Carl Ray passes away unexpectedly. As the mystery unfolds, Mary Lou finds there is more to Carl Ray – and to herself – than she ever knew.

Author Information

Sharon Creech grew up near Cleveland, Ohio, with her sister and three brothers. As a child, she wanted to be an ice-skater, a painter, a teacher, a reporter, and a singer. In college, Sharon became interested in literature and storytelling. She went on to teach English in England and Switzerland before writing novels for adults. *Absolutely Normal Chaos*, published in 1990, was her first novel for children. Then, in 1995, she won the Newbery Medal for *Walk Two Moons*. Sharon Creech has two grown children and lives with her husband in New Jersey.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

Use these questions and the activities that follow to get more out of the experience of reading *Absolutely Normal Chaos* by Sharon Creech.

1. Briefly explain why Mary Lou is keeping a summer journal. How does she begin her journal?

The journal is an assignment to be completed over the course of the summer. Mary Lou begins her journal by declaring that she does not know what a journal is. Then, she proceeds to describe each member of her immediate family.

2. Name three words Mary Lou is told she uses too often. How does she find new words to use to replace these old words?

On page 137, Mary Lou says that her mother has forbidden her to use the words *god*, *stupid*, and *stuff*. Mary Lou searches for alternative words in the thesaurus. Synonyms she finds for *stupid* include *besotted*, *cabbageheaded*, and *beefbrained*. Synonyms for *deity* include *The Supreme Being*, and *Alpha and Omega*. Synonyms for *stuff* include *sum* and *substance*, *elixir*, and *quintessence*.

3. What does Mary Lou find while snooping in Carl Ray's room? Whose initials are on one of these items?

Mary Lou finds a gold ring with the initials C.F. engraved in it. After Carl Ray confides that Carl Furtz is his father, Mary Lou deduces the initials belong to Carl Furtz, not Carl Ray Finney, as she initially guessed.

4. Why do the snapping turtles in the swimming hole remind Mary Lou of Mr. Furtz?

On page 161, Mary Lou explains, "Swimming in that hole all happy and everything and then hearing, 'Snapper!' reminded me of how we were going along all cheery as clams when the phone rang that day and we found out Mr. Furtz was dead." Mary Lou refers to the 'Snapper' again when she hears the news of Carl Ray's car accident. Therefore, answers should include some indication that the reader understands that Mary Lou associates 'Snapper' with unexpected, negative news.

5. What does GGP stand for? How does Mary Lou feel when she learns Beth Ann is "under consideration" for membership in this club?

GGP stands for Girls Going Places. On page 117, Mary Lou says she is "really mad" that Beth Ann is under consideration for membership in this "secret" club. Mary Lou's emotional reaction indicates that she is hurt that Beth Ann would consider joining a club without her. Eventually, Mary Lou and Beth Ann grow apart and Mary Lou no longer feels strongly about the club, even declining an invitation to join the GGP herself.

6. What does Carl Ray receive from Mr. Furtz? Why is Carl Ray reluctant to tell his family in West Virginia about this gift?

Mr. Furtz leaves Carl Ray a large sum of money to be used for his college education. Carl Ray also receives \$5,000 up front, which he spends on a car and gifts for the Finneys. Carl Ray is reluctant to tell his family in West Virginia about the gift because he does not know who has given him the money and because he left Virginia on bad terms with his father. Carl Ray was upset with his father because he and Mrs. Furtz waited so long to tell him that he was not Carl Joe's biological son.

7. Imagine you are a member of the Finney household and Carl Ray has just come to stay. What would you do or say to Carl Ray to make him feel welcome in your home?

Answers will vary but should indicate that through the story readers have to come to some opinion about appropriate strategies for hosting a houseguest. Look for answers that consider the Finneys' strategy and either defend that approach or suggest different approaches.

8. In her July 2 journal entry, Mary Lou writes, "My muse has abandoned me." What do you think she means by this? Be sure to include what you learned about muses on page 61 in your answer.

On page 61, Mary Lou writes, “a muse is a goddess who sits around inspiring people whenever she feels like it. If you’re telling a story and don’t feel too inspired, you’re supposed to call on a muse for help.” The tone of Mary Lou’s journal entries leading up to July 2, when she writes only that, “my muse has utterly abandoned me” suggests that she is feeling stressed about Mr. Furtz’s death, Carl Ray’s perceived sloth, and Beth Ann’s infatuation with Derek. Readers should indicate an understanding that being abandoned by one’s muse means feeling lost, uninspired, or frustrated.

9. Which character in the story would you most like to have as a friend? Explain your choice using examples from the text in your answer.

This question is intended to encourage readers to consider which qualities in people they value most. Readers should be sufficiently familiar with the major characters in the story to recognize the good and bad qualities which distinguish them in Mary Lou’s eyes.

10. Choose one character from the story you just read and one character from the *Odyssey*. What do the characters you have chosen have in common? How are they different?

Mary Lou describes several characters from the *Odyssey*, including Odysseus, who she says brags too much; Odysseus’s son Telemachus, who goes on a journey in search of his father; Athene, a strong female character who helps Telemachus; Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, who is faced with multiple male suitors in her husband’s absence; and the Sirens, who Mary Lou calls “sexy women who tempt men.” Readers should be able to draw connections between the *Odyssey* and the main story. For example, readers should recognize that Carl Ray and Odysseus are both searching for their fathers.

11. Reread Mary Lou’s description on page 119 of her classroom discussion about the meaning of the Robert Frost poem. Based on the information in Mary Lou’s journal entry, what do you think the woods in the poem represent?

Mary Lou does not include any text from the poem in her journal. Nor does she state the title. The only hint is the description being of a poem about a man standing in the woods on a snowy night. Readers must rely on Mary Lou’s memory of her class’s discussion about the meaning of the woods in the poem. One person thought the woods symbolized “fun”; other guesses included ice cream, surfing, and sex; still another student interpreted the woods to be woods. Readers should feel free to defend one of the above guesses or to present an alternative guess.

12. Imagine you are Mary Lou and your sister Maggie has just told you something negative about Beth Ann’s boyfriend, Derek. What would you do with this information? Would you tell Beth Ann? What would you say to Maggie?

Although answers will vary, the question refers to a conversation Mary Lou has with her older sister, Maggie, in which Maggie tells Mary Lou that Beth Ann’s boyfriend is a “jerk.” (Page 54) Mary Lou is unsure what to do with

the information. Then, on page 90 Mary Lou inadvertently repeats Maggie's description of Derek to Beth Ann, who becomes upset.

13. How does Mary Lou feel about Carl Ray when he first comes to Ohio? How do her feelings change after her trip to West Virginia?

Mary Lou initially describes Carl Ray as a "disappointment." Mary Lou is frustrated that she has to wait around the house to make the bed for Carl Ray, who sleeps until 1 P.M. She notes that Carl Ray eats more than his share at meals, never speaks, and seems reluctant to get a summer job. Later, while she is a houseguest at Carl Ray's home in West Virginia, Mary Lou overhears a conversation between two of her cousins in which the cousins complain that Mary Lou doesn't do any work and sits around all day reading and writing. Mary is upset because she did offer to help with chores but was repeatedly told to "set a while" by her hosts. Mary Lou realizes she may have been too hard on Carl Ray when he first arrived. Ultimately, she learns to appreciate Carl Ray for his shortcomings, not despite them.

14. Did you enjoy Mary Lou's journal entries about the *Odyssey*? Why or why not? Why do you think the author chose to include this book in her story? Be specific, using evidence from the text to support your argument.

The purpose of the question is to encourage readers to think more about why the author may have chosen to have Mary Lou read the *Odyssey* over the summer. Some readers may feel that Mary Lou's entries about the *Odyssey* added to the story while others may feel these entries disrupted the flow of the book. Answers should refer to specific elements of the *Odyssey* that were especially enjoyable or relevant or to specific elements which felt out of place or uninteresting.

15. At the end of the story, Carl Ray decides to return to West Virginia. Do you support this decision? What decision would you have made? Be sure to discuss Mr. Furtz's gift to Carl Ray in your answer.

Carl Ray decides to return to West Virginia even though Mrs. Furtz invites him to move in with her family. Because Mary Lou does not elaborate on Carl Ray's reason for moving, readers will need to speculate based on what they know about Carl Ray and his situation. If readers support Carl Ray's decision, look for answers which indicate why. For example, Carl Ray's decision to move home could be defensible on the grounds that he will have a chance to build a relationship with his father; however, other readers may feel that Carl Ray should have stayed to help Mrs. Furtz around the house. The second part of the question encourages readers to be creative and imagine what they would do based on their understanding of Carl Ray's options. Finally, readers are asked to discuss the money Mr. Furtz leaves Carl Ray for his college education. Carl Ray's decision to move home may be interpreted to mean that he has no plans to go to college or that he has decided to postpone college.

Note: These questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-6; Application: 7-9; Analysis: 10-11; Synthesis: 12-13; Evaluation: 14-15

Activities

1. Imagine you are Mary Lou Finney and one year has passed since the end of the story. Create a new entry for your journal. What is happening in your life? Have you heard from Carl Ray? Is Alex still calling you? What book are you reading now?

The activity is designed to test whether readers recognize patterns in Mary Lou's journal well enough to create a new entry. Entries can focus on one topic or discuss a variety of topics but should indicate the reader understands Mary Lou's thought process, value system, and general interests. Look for entries which describe plausible growth over the course of the year. For example, creative answers might speculate that Mary Lou has a new boyfriend, has developed a relationship with Mrs. Furtz, or has learned that Carl Ray will be going to college. Also look for answers which capture the speech patterns and so on in Mary Lou's voice.

2. Reread Mary Lou's list of characters from the *Odyssey* on page 63 and choose one character from the list. Use reference books to learn more about the character you have chosen. Write a short biography of this character including one important thing he or she is said to have done in Greek mythology.

The activity encourages readers to choose a favorite character from Greek mythology to study in more detail. Look for biographies which describe the character's role in mythology and his or her relationship to other characters from mythology.

3. Create a collage of important objects from Mary Lou's diary. Cut out images from magazines that remind you of these objects and arrange them with glue on a piece of paper. Leave space near each image to briefly explain why the object shown is important in the story.

Possible objects to include range from common household items in the Finney home such as the bed from the attic, the dinner table, and the telephone to items more specific to the story such as the ring Mr. Furtz gives Carl Ray, Carl Ray's car, and Mary Lou's copy of the *Odyssey*.