

Literature Circle Guide to
Never Mind! by Avi and Rachel Vail

Book Summary

Meg is great at sports. Edward likes skateboarding. Meg's room is spotless. Edward's room is a mess. Edward is midnight. Meg is twelve noon. What in the world do these twelve-year-olds from New York City have in common? They're twins! Get ready for double trouble when Meg tries to get into the popular crowd at school, and Edward does everything he can to keep her out of it. Before the twins know it, they're tangled in a very sticky web of imaginary boyfriends, ugly yellow clothes, a thirty-third floor secret, and a wild rock band! The adventure begins on a Tuesday evening and ends in a hilarious showdown on Saturday night. Will Meg become the most popular girl in school? Will Edward succeed in pulling off his most mischievous scheme? Oh, never mind...just read the book!

Author Information

Avi knows a lot about twins—because he is one! In fact, he was given his name by his twin sister when they were both about a year old. Although Avi wasn't the best student in school, he was determined to become a writer because writing had always been important to his family and friends. Avi began his writing career as a playwright, but after having children of his own, he started to write books for young people. Since then, Avi has written many children's books on all different subjects, including fantasy, animals, ghosts, and history. In 2003, Avi was presented with the Newbery Medal for his novel, *Crispin: The Cross of Lead*.

Rachel Vail worried a lot when she was in middle school. She worried about being too ordinary, too weird, and too ignorant. She also worried that she would make a fool of herself. (Sound like a certain pair of twins?) But this didn't stop Rachel from acting onstage, or taking magic, dance, and voice lessons. With all of her talents and her secret dream to become an actress, she never thought she'd become a writer. But that's exactly what Rachel became—a writer with a flair for telling children's stories. Rachel's booklist includes novels (*Ever After* and *Do-Over*, just to name a few) and picture books (*Sometimes I'm Bombaloo*, *Over the Moon*, and *Mama Rex & T*). Rachel lives in New York City with her husband, two sons, one bird, and one fish.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. How does Edward react when Meg announces that she wants to join the High Achievers Club?

Edward is very much against the idea of Meg joining the HAC. He thinks the HAC is for snobs. In fact, Ed wants to start the LAC (Low Achievers Club) in response to Meg joining the HAC. One of the main objectives of the LAC would be to prevent Meg from getting into the HAC. Edward thinks that if Meg becomes an HAC member, she'll "lord it over" him for the rest of his life. (p. 10) He assumes that Meg wants to be in the HAC so she can put him down and make him feel bad about himself.

2. What does each twin do on Tuesday night that sparks all of the misunderstandings that occur throughout the rest of the novel?

Meg lies about Ed—she says his name is Ted and that he’s a musical genius. Ed eavesdrops on Meg’s conversation with Kim. He later calls Kim back and pretends to be Ted. The combination of the twins’ actions pushes the plot forward. All of the misunderstandings between the characters, and the lies that ensue are caused by Meg and Ed’s initial actions on Tuesday night.

3. Edward and Meg emphasize that they are completely different people. But they also reveal (inadvertently) that they have some similarities. List three thoughts, feelings, or ideas that the twins share.

The similarities between Edward and Meg include the following:

- **Both Edward and Meg insist that they are completely different from each other.**
- **Edward and Meg come up with the same name for Edward’s band: Never Mind.**
- **Both say: “Nobody around here ever takes me seriously!” Meg says it on page 14. Edward says it on page 113.**
- **When they ask each other who called, they both answer: “One of my friends you don’t know.” Meg says it on page 31. Edward says it on page 105.**
- **At two different points in the book, both have a similar thought: *I will rip off his head and yell bad things down his former throat.* Meg has this thought on page 82. Edward has a similar thought on page 110.**
- **They both stick up for each other when they know the other is being threatened or disparaged in some way. Edward says on page 92: “You hurt one Runyon—surprise! You just bought a pain ticket from the other!” And on page 188, Meg thinks, *You call my brother a loser, you just bought yourself a kiss from my fist.***

4. In your own words, describe Meg’s emotions on pages 82-87. What’s going through her mind when she says, “...and there’s Edward of all people, the immature and stunted weirdo, looking deep and lost in down-in-the-dumps thoughtfulness. I almost chucked my book at him”?

Meg feels angry and frustrated because she has no one to blame but herself for the mess she’s in. She wants to take her anger out on Edward, but Edward is acting mature, thoughtful, and serious—just the way she thinks she should be acting. Meg says “the world has gone inside out” when she begins to wonder if Edward isn’t the “immature and stunted weirdo” she has always thought him to be. Edward has suddenly taken on Meg’s characteristics, and Meg has suddenly taken on Edward’s. This makes Meg feel even more confused and frustrated.

5. On page 49, Stuart responds to Edward’s plan to embarrass Meg by saying, “You know, you could just leave it alone. You. Her. Two people. Different. Get it?” Can you explain what keeps Edward from taking his friend’s advice? What drives him to go to all lengths to embarrass his sister?

Edward is determined to embarrass Meg because he thinks she's determined to embarrass him. When she first brings up the High Achievers Club at the dinner table, Edward thinks she is purposely trying to make him feel bad. Launching an attack on his sister is Edward's defense mechanism. Edward wants to make sure that the differences between himself and his sister remain clear and distinct. And he wants to be the one defining those differences. He doesn't want to give Meg the power to say that he's different in a negative way—having fewer friends, being less ambitious, less smart, or less cool.

6. Think of a good or bad experience you've had at school (i.e. winning a basketball game, forgetting your lines in a school play, going on an exciting overnight field trip, getting sent to the principal's office, getting an A on a math test). Now look at your experience through the eyes of Edward and Meg. What would each twin say and/or think about your experience and how you handled it?

Answers will vary for each student. If a student wants to look at his/her acceptance into an honor society through the eyes of Meg, he/she may write that Meg would think that this is a great achievement. Meg would say that it takes a lot of hard work, dedication, and drive to be accepted into an honor society. However, Edward would think an honor society isn't such a big deal. For example, he might say "honor societies are for snobs and losers." However, if a student chooses to look at a trip to the principal's office (for skateboarding through the halls or pulling a prank on a teacher) through the eyes of Edward, he/she may write that Edward would admire the nerve and sense of humor it takes to pull off something like that. Meg, on the other hand, would think a stunt like that is foolish and disrespectful. Students can frame their experiences with Edward's sharp wit, imagination, cleverness, and nerve; and with Meg's ambition, drive, nervousness, and her strong desire to be popular and normal.

7. If you had a twin or sibling who you wanted to dissociate yourself from, what would you do? Would you use some of the tactics that Edward and Meg used (i.e. embarrassment, scheming, invasion of privacy, lying) to draw the line between you and your sibling? Or would you deal with the situation in another way?

Answers will vary for each student. Some students may choose to engage in sibling rivalry like Meg and Edward in order to draw a line between themselves and their siblings. They may want to use clever schemes or lies to make sure they're completely dissociated from their brother or sister. Other students may take a more passive approach. They may choose to ignore their sibling and pretend he or she doesn't exist. They may not volunteer any information about their sibling, but they'll refrain from telling lies. Some students may choose to talk things out rationally, or ask a parent to referee the situation.

8. On page 6, Meg says, "The day I got the acceptance letter from Fischer was just about the happiest day of my long life. It felt like relief, like freedom...my chance to reinvent myself as just me, Meg Runyon." Let's say Meg comes to you for advice *before* any of the events in *Never Mind!* take place. She wants to reinvent herself and asks you to help her get started. What would you say to her?

Answers will vary for each student. Some students may tell Meg to act and dress differently. They may advise her to hang out with a certain group of people, try out for all the sports teams, and get involved with various school clubs. Other students may tell Meg to just be herself. They may discourage her from reinventing herself.

9. One of the main focuses of this novel is the relationship between the twins. But there are other relationships in *Never Mind!* that play an important role in the novel. Examine the relationships between each of the twins and their parents, the relationship between Meg and her friends (Kim, Della, and Esther), and the relationship between Edward and Stuart. How do each of these relationships move the story along? What do they have in common? What do they reveal about Meg and Edward's personalities?

All of these relationships reveal Meg and Edward's mixed-up state of mind and jumbled feelings. They're unsure about themselves, who they are, and who they want to be. Their friends and parents have a difficult time understanding them because Meg and Edward don't really understand themselves very well. Meg is caught somewhere between Esther Grossbart and Kimberly Wu Woodson. Edward is so preoccupied with his plans to make his sister miserable, he doesn't know who he is: "cool Ted" or "immature Edward."

Because all of the relationships suffer from communication problems, there are many misunderstandings between the characters. Since the plot of this story hinges upon these misunderstandings, these relationships drive the action throughout the novel. This miscommunication also adds humor to the story.

10. *Never Mind!* is written from the point of view (POV) of both Meg and Edward. Meg tells her side of the story and what she experiences, and Edward does the same. Many times throughout the novel, we're looking at one situation through two different pairs of eyes. What is the function of these two different points of view? How does this "twin" or dual point of view in *Never Mind!* affect the way you, the reader, experience the setting, events, and characters of the story?

In *Never Mind!*, the reader is presented with two versions and two points of view of the story. As a result, he/she can get a wider, more varied perspective of the setting, events, and characters. For example, during Kimberly's party the reader gets to see the events taking place from the audience (Meg's POV) and from the stage (Edward's POV). These two POVs act like movie cameras positioned in different places on a set. Each movie camera records different footage—a unique angle, expression, movement, etc. Multiple POVs also allow the reader to experience a range of emotions, ideas, and thoughts from two or more characters. When the two POVs conflict and one version of the story challenges the other version—the reader gets a new insight into the characters. The reader can ponder who might be exaggerating or stretching the truth.

With the dual POVs in *Never Mind!*, the reader can achieve a more well-rounded and balanced perception of the world that Meg and Edward live in. If the story was told only through Edward's POV, we would still get an idea of what Meg's personality is like (Edward would provide that information). But the story would

become more biased, as it would be influenced and shaped exclusively by Edward's thoughts and imagination.

11. The events of this novel take place over a week. Make a timeline (Tuesday through Sunday) and summarize the twins' relationship for each day. Think about how they view, react to, and form opinions of each other. By the end of the week, how have Meg and Edward changed? How has their relationship changed? And how have they remained the same?

The following is a timeline for *Never Mind!*:

Tuesday:

Edward and Meg are very much at odds. After Edward decides he has to keep Meg out of the High Achievers Club, he likens the challenge to a "heavyweight boxing match, round 6,426." Meg is embarrassed by her brother and does everything possible to keep the true Edward a secret from Kimberly.

Wednesday:

Edward begins to have second thoughts about embarrassing Meg at Kimberly's party. He wonders if Meg has set a trap for him. Then he wonders if he's the one who's actually going to be the fool at the party. Meg begins to envy Edward because he at least knows what his "Coolness Rating" is. She even starts to feel some regret for the way she treated him in the past. At the end of the day, everything has gone topsy-turvy. Meg is starting to think like Edward and vice versa. The twins also reveal that they care about one another. "It was cool. Like we were almost, maybe, friends," says Meg about her brother. (p. 85)

Thursday:

The twins are wrapped up in their own drama: Edward with Kimberly, and Meg with her dad and the upcoming party on Saturday. Edward does confront Meg about her "boyfriend" Phelps. He expresses his disapproval of him, which is linked to his feelings of concern and love for Meg.

Friday:

There isn't much interaction between the twins on this day. Meg gets a reprieve from her troubles when she has a "normal" and fun conversation with Esther Grossbart. Edward spends time with his band. His worries continue to grow as Saturday quickly approaches.

Saturday:

The twins spend the day apart, getting ready for the party. During the party, the twins experience a very strong connection. Meg cheers Edward on while he sings. She tells Kimberly that Edward is "the bravest, coolest person ever."

Sunday:

The twins show that they respect one another. They smile at each other and laugh together. Meg tells Edward that "there's room for improvement, but [that] he's...okay." Edward replies, "I have a twin sister—and she's exactly the same way." The twins have finally complimented each other, and Edward has just pointed out that he has something in common with his twin sister.

By the end of the week, Meg is able to tear up her list of all the things that are wrong with her. And she comes up with one thing to include on her "not-so-horrible

parts of me” list. Although Meg still doesn’t like her hair, forehead, and “unflat stomach” (p.199), she doesn’t feel the need to dwell on those things. She learns to laugh at herself and not take herself so seriously. Edward also has much more confidence by the end of the novel. He thought he was going to die of embarrassment if he performed at Kimberly’s party, but he actually had fun. “Maybe a hundred kids packed tight jumping, swaying, hands up, having *fun*. The most amazing thing of all was that I was having fun too,” says Edward. (p.181) On page 197, Edward calls himself, “smart...maybe a low achiever. And very cool.” At the beginning of the novel, Edward only associates smarts and good grades with Meg. He now considers himself smart and cool in his own way.

Edward and Meg’s relationship has also changed. They can laugh with one another and they feel more comfortable around each other. They don’t have the need to prove to themselves and to everyone else that they are complete opposites. In fact, Edward invites Meg to go skateboarding with him (p.199)—something he would never have done earlier in the week. They understand and respect each other. Meg and Edward won’t dwell on the negative aspects of their differences.

12. The tone of *Never Mind!* is light and comical. The dialog and situations are funny. However, the novel still grapples with some serious and problematic issues (growing up, peer pressure, sibling rivalry, insecurity, parent/child relationships). How would you change the way the twins’ story is told to give the novel a more serious tone? **Answers will vary for each student. In order to change *Never Mind!* into a serious novel, there could be more of a focus on the inner turmoil of the twins. One of the more serious moments in the novel is when Meg remembers the time when she made fun of Edward at school. When the other kids held their noses and called him, “Runyon the onion” (p. 57), Meg did the same thing. She says, “Edward didn’t growl at me the way he did at them. He just looked, well surprised. And sad.” (pp. 57-58) By spending more time exploring these feelings, and less time dealing with funny misunderstandings and coincidences, the novel would become more serious.**

Even though Meg and Edward emphasize their differences throughout the novel, they never get into a long, heated argument with each other. A more serious version of this story would include many more confrontations between the twins. An argument between Meg and Edward could take the place of Kimberly’s party (and the hilarious performance by *Never Mind*) as the climax of the novel.

The novel could also deal with peer pressure and parent relationships in a more serious manner by making the supporting characters in the book less goofy and more severe. For example, Mr. Runyon is characterized as a silly, funny, and clumsy man. He voices his concerns about Meg’s boyfriend by talking about Monopoly. To make the relationship between Mr. Runyon and the twins more serious, Mr. Runyon could be portrayed as a harsh, strict father.

If Kimberly were portrayed as a more threatening and conniving character, her relationship with Meg would become much more serious. In the novel, Kimberly is a

snob, but she's also "Dimberly"—a foolish girl who has a shallow personality. If her character was meaner, she could become a bully and cause all kinds of serious problems for Meg and Edward.

13. What is Kimberly Wu Woodson and Annabelle Jones' definition of "popular"? Would you say that this definition applies at your school? Compare and contrast the social rankings at Fischer High School with your school. Why do you think some kids (like Meg) value popularity so much? Who or what defines popularity at your school, and if it were up to you, how would you want to define "popular"?

Answers will vary for each student. Kimberly and Annabelle define popular as getting good grades, being good at sports, keeping up an active social life, and having a high "Coolness Rating." Being beautiful, fashionable, smart, snobby, and exclusive can all be considered prerequisites for being popular in *Never Mind!*

14. How important is it to be "normal"? Meg tries desperately to be normal and fit in with the popular crowd at school. Even Edward, who defines himself as the more alternative twin, doesn't want to embarrass himself at Kimberly's party. Do you agree with Meg and Edward that being normal is extremely important? Would they be better off if they didn't try so hard to be normal?

Answers will vary for each student. Some students may argue that it's not that important to be normal—especially when "being normal" requires a person to change who they are, do things they don't want to do, or limit themselves in some way. In *Never Mind!* being normal means being able to fit in. Both Meg and Edward are concerned about being normal. Embarrassment is a consequence of being abnormal (i.e. making a fool of oneself at a party, having a weird twin brother/sister, making up an imaginary boyfriend). For Meg, normalcy is defined by the High Achievers Club. Anyone who does not get good grades, is bad at sports, and is not involved in community service is definitely not normal—according to the HAC.

Striving to be "normal" makes Meg think that she has to achieve certain things, act a certain way, and be friends with certain people in order to be accepted by others. With these demanding and limiting expectations, Meg can't be herself. In the end, Edward manages to overcome his fears of being abnormal. Instead of leaving Kimberly's party and abandoning his band, he sticks around and performs. If he did give into his fear of being embarrassed, Edward would have missed out on the very exciting experience of performing onstage.

However, one can argue that trying to be "normal" can also act as a guide and a confidence booster. On page 181, Edward says, "I grabbed the microphone the way I've seen them do it on TV." Edward bases his stage performance on a normal or accepted image of a rock star. This allows Edward to start singing and have fun.

15. Think of an alternate ending to this novel. What would have happened if Edward did escape from the party? What if Kimberly found out who Edward really was? How would things have turned out if Meg didn't stick up for Della and her other friends at the party?

What if Mr. Lowe's miracle did happen and Jason Bartleby wanted to sign Never Mind to a record contract? Let your imagination run wild and write a new ending to *Never Mind!* **Answers will vary for each student. Some students may choose to explore new endings that include a missing-in-action Edward, a confrontation between Edward and Kimberly, an argument between Della and Meg, an exciting record deal between Jason Bartleby and Never Mind, a first date for Meg and Phelps, or the sudden appearance of a stranger named Ted.**

Note: These literature circle questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-5; Application: 6-8; Analysis: 9-10; Synthesis: 11-12; Evaluation: 13-15