

BOOK CLUB KIT

#1 INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE LOST WIFE AND THE VELVET HOURS

ALYSON
RICHMAN

"Ms. Richman is a very special talent."

—#1 *New York Times* bestselling author KRISTIN HANNAH

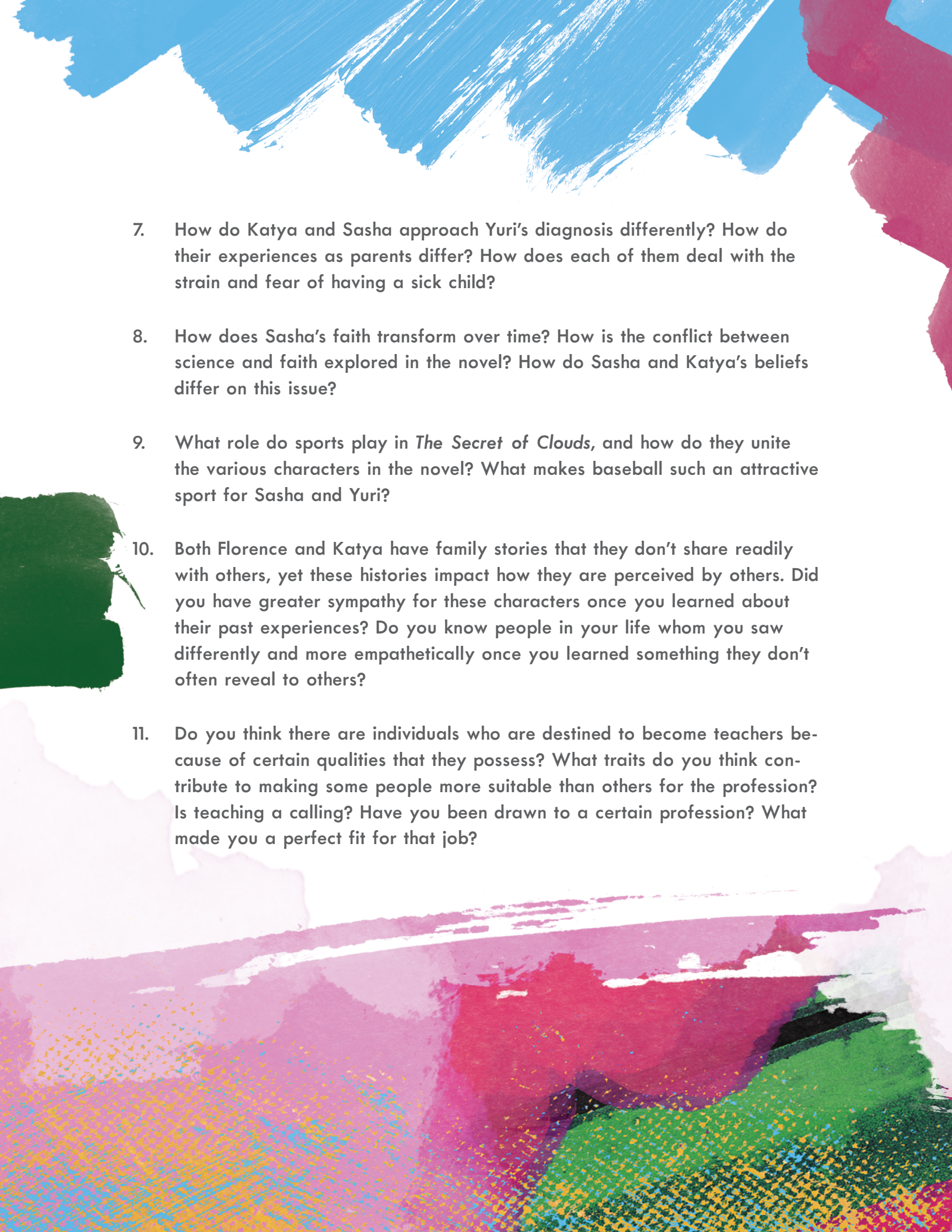
The
SECRET of
CLOUDS

A NOVEL



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Maggie and Yuri's teacher-student relationship is the heart of *The Secret of Clouds*. Do you have a teacher who left a lasting impression on you or made a permanent impact on your life?
2. How do music and dance serve as different forms of language for the characters in *The Secret of Clouds*? Think about how music is embraced in Maggie's home and how it ultimately draws her to Daniel. How is it different from Katya's family's attitude toward her dancing? Does the fact that Katya is a ballet dancer influence her romance with Sasha?
3. How do the Topper and Krasny households communicate through food? What are the cultural differences? What are the similarities? Does food play a role in your family's traditions and holidays?
4. Maggie's mother tells her, "We can't be so afraid of experiencing pain that it interferes with the things we love." What are the different painful obstacles that the characters face, and how do they overcome them?
5. There are several references to butterflies in the novel. Why do certain characters identify with butterflies? Sasha also describes the butterfly effect to Katya early on in their relationship. Can you think of an example in your life where one individual meeting changed your destiny?
6. Do you believe Yuri's heart defect was caused by the Chernobyl accident or was just a random case of bad luck? Does the author imply there were certain things that increased Katya's risk of having a child with a birth defect?

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7. How do Katya and Sasha approach Yuri's diagnosis differently? How do their experiences as parents differ? How does each of them deal with the strain and fear of having a sick child?
 8. How does Sasha's faith transform over time? How is the conflict between science and faith explored in the novel? How do Sasha and Katya's beliefs differ on this issue?
 9. What role do sports play in *The Secret of Clouds*, and how do they unite the various characters in the novel? What makes baseball such an attractive sport for Sasha and Yuri?
 10. Both Florence and Katya have family stories that they don't share readily with others, yet these histories impact how they are perceived by others. Did you have greater sympathy for these characters once you learned about their past experiences? Do you know people in your life whom you saw differently and more empathetically once you learned something they don't often reveal to others?
 11. Do you think there are individuals who are destined to become teachers because of certain qualities that they possess? What traits do you think contribute to making some people more suitable than others for the profession? Is teaching a calling? Have you been drawn to a certain profession? What made you a perfect fit for that job?



Q&
A


ALYSON RICHMAN

How would you describe *The Secret of Clouds*?

The Secret of Clouds centers around the transformative and powerful bond that develops between a twelve-year-old boy who is born with a rare health condition that prevents him from attending school with other children, and the young teacher who is called to his home to tutor him. While Yuri, the child of Ukrainian immigrants, is searching for a lifeline to the world outside his doorstep, his teacher Maggie is striving to find the best way to make his life as full as it can be.

What compelled you to write this particular story?

The Secret of Clouds was initially inspired by a story a dear friend and teacher shared with me, about how every year she assigns her third-grade class to write a letter to their eighteen-year-old selves, and she holds on to those letters until the week they graduate



high school—a decade later. One year, she tutored a child who was too sick to attend school, but she still gave him the same writing assignment as the rest of her class, keeping his letter with those from her other students. When it was eventually time for him to graduate, emotional and poignant memories of those home-tutoring sessions returned to her, and she realized just how deeply this one particular student had transformed her. I was immediately struck by this profound and life-changing connection between a teacher and their students, which can transcend time and distance, and I wanted to explore that more deeply.

A great teacher can leave a lasting, life-long impact on his or her students. Did you have a teacher who inspired you to reach your greatest potential?


I always say *The Secret of Clouds* is a love letter to those teachers from my own childhood who helped me become the writer I am today. There are many who stand out for me, but it was my sixth-grade English teacher, Mr. Swink, whom I always return to, as he was the one who first encouraged me to keep a writing journal and fill its pages with poetry and short stories. I can still hear the lilt of his Southern accent saying to me: “Alyson, when you’re a writer,” and never “if you ever become a writer.” Mr. Swink passed away far too young, at the age of only thirty-eight, and I carry his memory with me every day. He introduced me to so many authors whom I still adore, and he made me think about the importance of every word I put down on a blank page. I’ve tried to pay tribute to him with every book I’ve written so far, but never more so than with this new book.



***The Secret of Clouds* is a love letter to those teachers from my own childhood who helped me become the writer I am today.**

Each character in the novel—Maggie, Yuri, and Katya—is interesting in their own way. Which character do you relate to the most?

As with all of my novels, I purposefully try to create characters who are unique and genuine, and I imagine them each having their own colors and textures.



**That love
between a mother
and child is closest
to my heart.**

Maggie is written in a warm palette, with her Italian heritage, her openness, and her deep love of food. I think that's probably the type of character that I'm drawn to as a friend in my everyday life. Katya, the former ballerina with the harsh childhood back in the Soviet Union, is purposefully drawn in a cooler palette, and her true emotions aren't readily apparent. But beneath her icy, often stoic veneer, the heart of a mother burns fiercely. Katya's love and dedication to her son, Yuri, make her the character that I ultimately relate to the most, because that love between a mother and child is closest to my heart.

Was there a character that was especially easy or difficult to write?

This might make you laugh, but it wasn't a particular character that was most difficult to write. Instead, it was all of the baseball-related elements in the book that provided the biggest challenges for me! My own son has played baseball since he was eight years old. He doesn't just love the physical aspects of it he also relishes the mental complexities of the game, including all of the strategies and the unexpected plays that could suddenly alter the final outcome. That said, I've never understood how anyone could enjoy a game that has the potential to run three hours, and sometimes even longer! I used to joke around with my son that in the amount of time it took to get him there early for a pregame practice and then to watch the whole game, I could have flown to Paris! But on a more serious note, I wanted to better understand why this sport so captivates the hearts and minds of millions of die-hard fans. I interviewed people of all ages on why they love baseball. It was really interesting to learn more of what made this sport so special to them, as it inspires such devotion and passion and a deep sense of nostalgia in its fans. So much of this research helped Yuri become a more credible twelve-year-old boy, while at the same time, helping me appreciate why my son loves baseball so much.



Setting plays an influential role in many of your novels. *The Secret of Clouds* is largely set where you live in Long Island, New York. What made you choose to set part of this story in Ukraine?

Because all of my previous novels have so extensively woven in a historical theme, I again wanted to create a backstory of a part of history that I felt needed to be explored more in contemporary literature. When my son was an infant, his first babysitter was a nurse from Ukraine. She shared with me her stories of the accident at the nearby Chernobyl nuclear plant in 1986. I'll never forget her describing how, for three days, no one in the area knew about the accident, so they were all outside sunning themselves in the unseasonably hot weather and bathing in the unusually warm waters of the local river. Babies were soon born with rare cancers and heart defects akin to what my character Yuri has. Countless health problems related to the radiation leak still plague the Ukrainian population. I wanted to illuminate this trauma in my novel. Weaving together the story of the letters of the Long Island schoolchildren and the history of Chernobyl was the perfect way to explore the themes that were important to me.

You're well-known for writing historical fiction, but this is your first novel with a contemporary perspective. Tell us about that decision.

The decision was not planned. Truly, I was so moved by the beautiful story my friend had told me about a teacher and her student and the letter that became a permanent artifact of their friendship, that's where the first seeds of the novel began. I hope I'll always remain an author who pursues stories in which I will learn something from the research and development of the book, regardless of whether it takes place in more contemporary times or in the past. In the end, I hope that my thirst for answers is conveyed through the pages I write.

What kind of research did you do to help inform the novel?

The research was divided into two parts: The Ukrainian research, which involved interviewing Ukrainian immigrants who were in their native country when the Chernobyl accident occurred and learning about how they eventually came to America. Maggie's character also required a significant amount of research, because I wanted to ensure that I accurately described the curriculum that was being taught in Long Island schools in the 1990s. For example, the creation of the writer's note-

books that Maggie assigns her students, was an initiative started through the work of literacy educator Lucy Calkins and the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, and I learned about that through my teacher interviews. It was truly one of the highlights of my research, being able to have these wonderful teachers all relay their personal histories with me, and learn about what had drawn them to their profession and the special bonds they've created with their students over the years.

What do you hope readers will take away after reading *The Secret of Clouds*?

I hope that after reading the novel, the reader will pause for a moment and remember at least one teacher who might have left a permanent fingerprint on their life. The funny thing is that when I have explained the book to many of my teacher friends, their universal response is always: "But make sure you emphasize how much our lives have also been changed by our students!"

So it's exactly that beautiful dance of mutual impact between teachers and their students that is at the core of *The Secret of Clouds*.

ACTIVITY

Write a letter to yourself to be opened in the future.

If you do not know what to write, feel free to use one of these writing prompts from the book:

1. Write about which character you most relate to and why.
2. Find a descriptive passage in the book that you liked and illuminate why you picked it.
3. Write about something you experienced in your life that has made you "wonder."