

# BOOKNOTES

READERS GUIDE

## thematic connections

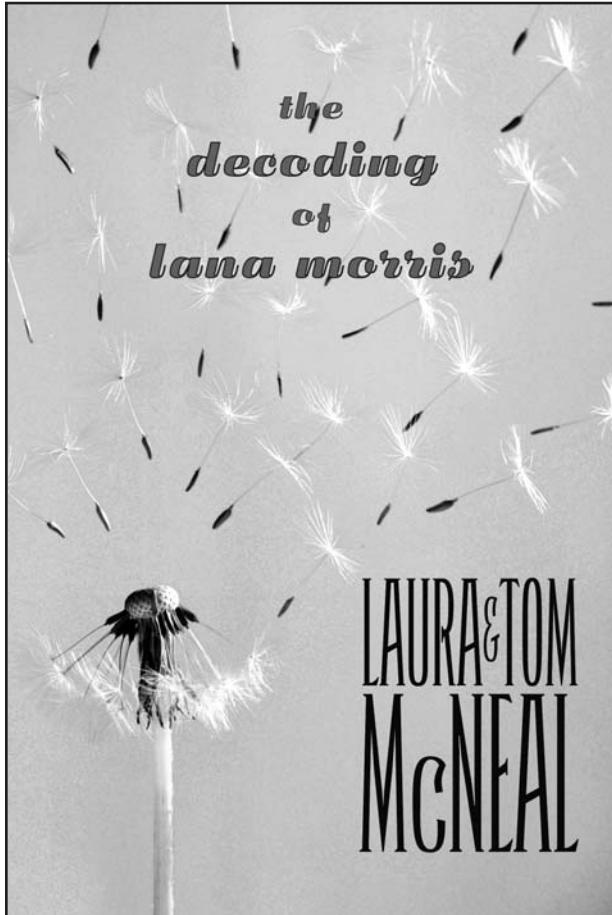
**Friendship • Making Choices  
Acceptance & Belonging  
Special Needs & Disabilities  
Family & Relationships  
Grades 7 up**

## about the book

**When Lana arrives at her foster home, a family comprised of a wicked mother, a sexy father, and a house full of special needs kids, she thinks her life is over; she soon discovers her complicated journey has only just begun.**

For 16-year-old foster child Lana Morris, life presents more questions than answers. Resolute and determined to survive, she tries not to care that Trina and K.C. won't allow her into their club, and she denies her connection to the special needs kids in her foster home. She also is confused about her feelings for Whit, her foster father; clearly hates Veronica, her foster mother; and is surprised when her friendship with Chet, the boy next door, threatens to blossom into love. One day, however, after another hellish ride tagging along with the cool kids in K.C.'s trunk, she discovers Miss Hekkity's antique and curiosity shop, where she trades her cherished two-dollar bill for 13 sheets of drawing paper. Soon Lana finds her life is changing in mysterious ways, ways that resemble what she has drawn on her new paper. Could she really have the power to make her deepest desires come true?

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Alfred A. Knopf HC: 978-0-375-83106-5 (0-375-83106-1)  
GLB: 978-0-375-93106-2 (0-375-93106-6)

**"Everybody's got  
their own secret code."**

—Whit, in *The Decoding of Lana Morris*



## pre-reading activity

As you read the first chapter aloud to the students, ask them to write down what they learn about Lana. Then, as a class, compile the information gleaned from listening to the chapter on the board. From this list, ask students to formally compose questions the author has introduced about Lana and her life situation. Write these questions down on the board as well, and as the students read, allow them to answer the questions, draw conclusions, and generate additional conversation.

Jacket photograph © 2007 by Angelo Cavallini/Conica Collection/Getty Images

## questions

- The first time Whit meets Lana he tells her, “I’m going to make it my personal mission to learn the Morris code. . . . Everybody’s got their own secret code and then one day—along comes the Decoder.” (pp. 14–15) What are Whit, Veronica, Chet, and Lana’s secret codes? Who is the decoder for each of them? How are their secret codes cracked?
- Lana is willing to ride in the trunk of K.C.’s car in order to spend time with people who make fun of her. What does this say about Lana? How is Chet different from K.C. and Trina?
- On page 86, Whit tells Lana that everybody worries too much, including her. “It’s a widespread affliction. Someday I’ll help cure you of it.” Does Whit help Lana overcome worry? How does worry play a role in Lana’s life?
- Eventually, Lana’s thoughts of Whit begin to replace her thoughts about her father. What does this say about her growing affection for Whit? Why is she confused by Whit’s actions? Are Whit’s actions toward Lana inappropriate? Why or why not?
- Lana learns about wishes from Whit, from Chet, and from the special paper that she purchased from Mrs. Hekkity. What does she learn from each of them? How does what she learns help her to be a better person? How do her wishes change from the first day at Whit and Veronica’s house to the day she leaves?
- Lana comes to the realization that some people have “zipped-tight hearts,” and she despises them for the pain they have caused the innocent. (p. 115) What prevents Lana from zipping up her heart? How do the Snicks change Lana’s life? What needs do they meet in each other that no one else can meet?
- K.C., Spink, and Trina terrorize the Snicks and Lana when they make their trip downtown to buy groceries. What motivates the three of them to bully those that are less fortunate than themselves? Why does Chet step forward to help Lana and the Snicks? How does this event change the relationship between Chet and Lana?

## for group discussion

- When Lana begins listening to Chet on his late night podcast, she realizes she has underestimated Chet. What does she learn about Chet from listening to him? Why is Chet so secretive about what he does? How does Lana help Chet with his program?
- Lana is not afraid of taking risks, but when she steals Veronica's car and kidnaps the Snicks, she and Chet could wind up in major trouble. Is doing something wrong for the right reason ever okay? Why or why not?
- After Veronica comes home from the hospital, she confronts Lana about her feelings for Whit. How is Veronica's angry outburst on pages 220–222 a blessing for Lana? How does Veronica's revelation begin to open Lana's eyes?
- Lana believes the Ladies Drawing Kit brings her wishes to life. What evidence does she have to support this belief? What other reasons could explain the unusual reactions her drawings bring? Is the paper really magic? Why or why not?

## vocabulary/ use of language

The authors' unique word choices bring nuances of meaning that ordinary words don't carry. Ask students to keep a two-sided vocabulary journal as they read the book. On the left side of the page, they should copy down phrases such as the ones below that convey unique word choices. On the right side, students should react personally to the word choice through explanation, drawing, personal association, and/or revision.

- "A hint of truculence in her voice" (p. 4)  
"This one is stellar" (p. 5)  
"Low, rich, mellifluous voice" (p. 5)  
"A cranky old misanthrope" (p. 35)  
"Not especially acquisitive or covetous by nature" (p. 39)  
"Wear a label saying OMINOUS" (p. 51)  
"Then raucous laughter from the Snicks" (p. 65)  
"She feels discombobulated" (p. 94)  
"I like the Mrs. Hairball moniker" (p. 124)  
"Hard derisive laughter" (p. 162)  
"Stare with theatrical petulance" (p. 165)  
"An odd, ardent expression forms" (p. 173)

## writing activities

- Mrs. Stoneman, Garth's mother, reports to the authorities that the Winters' home is not an acceptable environment for her son and the other children living in the home. Ask students to choose one of the following letter writing activities: (1) assume the voice of Lana and write to Mrs. Stoneman assuring her the Winters' home is a great place for her son, (2) assume the voice of the Child Protective Service (CPS) employee explaining to Mr. and Mrs. Winters why they are removing the children from their home, or (3) assume the voice of Mrs. Hekkity detailing her reasons to the CPS for wanting all six children. Have each student read their letter to the class.
- Chet's podcast brings enjoyment and entertainment to Lana and a select audience of listeners. Ask students to work with a partner to write a script for a podcast similar to Chet's, including humor, thought-provoking questions, commercials, and advice to callers. Then, have students record their podcasts to play for the class.

## related titles

by theme



### Finding Miracles

**Julia Alvarez**

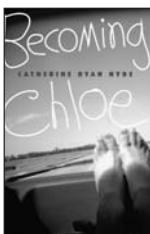
Family & Relationships • Courage • Adoption • Coming of Age

Grades 7 up

Laurel-Leaf PB: 978-0-553-49406-8 (0-553-49406-6)

Alfred A. Knopf HC: 978-0-375-82760-0 (0-375-82760-9)

GLB: 978-0-375-92760-7 (0-375-92760-3)



### Becoming Chloe

**Catherine Ryan Hyde**

Friendship • Trust • Hope • Homelessness

Grades 9 up

Alfred A. Knopf HC: 978-0-375-83258-1 (0-375-83258-0)

GLB: 978-0-375-93258-8 (0-375-93258-5)



### Jailbait

**Lesléa Newman**

Survival • Intergenerational Relationships

Love & Romance • Trust

Grades 9 up

Delacorte Press PB: 978-0-385-73405-9 (0-385-73405-0)

Delacorte Press HC: 978-0-385-73198-0 (0-385-73198-1)

GLB: 978-0-385-90230-4 (0-385-90230-1)



### A Brief Chapter in My Impossible Life

**Dana Reinhardt**

Adoption • Family & Relationships

Self-Discovery • Love & Romance

Grades 7 up

Wendy Lamb Books PB: 978-0-375-84691-5 (0-375-84691-3)

Laurel-Leaf PB: 978-0-553-49496-9 (0-553-49496-1)

Wendy Lamb Books HC: 978-0-385-74698-4 (0-385-74698-9)

GLB: 978-0-385-90940-2 (0-385-90940-3)

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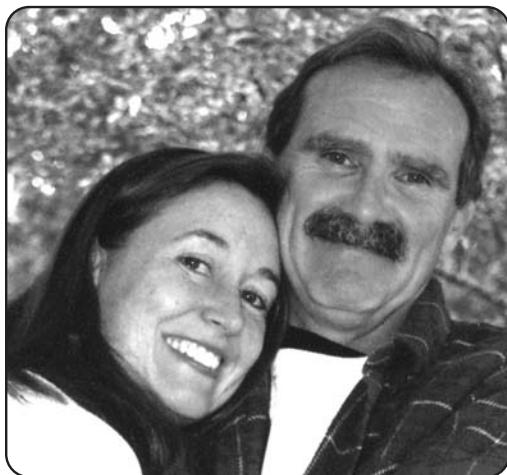


photo courtesy of the authors

## about the authors

**Laura McNeal** is a freelance journalist and former English teacher. **Tom McNeal** is the critically acclaimed author of many short stories and the adult novel *Goodnight, Nebraska*, winner of the 1999 James A. Michener Memorial Prize. They have collaborated on other young adult novels, including *Crooked* (an ALA Top Ten Book for Young Adults), *Zipped*, and *Crushed*. The McNeals are married and live in Fallbrook, California.

The authors will donate 10% of their net proceeds to [The Arc of the United States](http://www.thearc.org), an organization which advocates for the rights and full participation of children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Visit [www.thearc.org](http://www.thearc.org) for more information.

## internet resources

### National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center

[www.safeyouth.org/scripts/teens/bullying.asp](http://www.safeyouth.org/scripts/teens/bullying.asp)

Bullying: what it is and how to stop it.

### Podcasting News

[www.podcastingnews.com/articles/How-to-Podcast.html](http://www.podcastingnews.com/articles/How-to-Podcast.html)

Instructions on how to make your first podcast.

= Listening Library audio available