

# How Not to Be Popular Study Guide

## How Not to Be Popular by Jennifer Ziegler

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# Plot Summary

Sugar Magnolia Dempsey or Maggie Dempsey to her peers, is angry with her parents because they are making her move once again. This time she is leaving Portland, Oregon and her beloved boyfriend, Trevor.

Within days of leaving Portland, Oregon, Trevor has already called off their agreement to a long-term relationship and Maggie finds herself in the back of her parents Hearst traveling south to Austin, Texas with her heart broken. She vows to not make friends in Austin and to do everything in her power to remain unpopular. She believes that if she refuses to befriend anyone then it won't hurt so much when her parents want to leave in four months.

In Austin, her parents, Les and Rosie, aging hippies, manage a second-hand vintage clothing store. The family lives in an apartment above the store. Normally, Maggie is open with her parents but she has neglected to tell them about Trevor or her plan to not make friends.

To secure her place as an unpopular student, Maggie chooses crazy and ugly ensembles to wear from the clothing store. She sits with the unpopular awkward girl, Penny, and is rude to Miles, the popular boy who likes her. But after weeks of her charade, she finds that people are beginning to copy her and that she is beginning to like Penny and Austin.

To beef up her resume for college applications, Maggie joins the club that Penny is in the Helping Hands, a service club. A boy in her homeroom, Jack, whom she's starting to like is also the president of Helping Hands. Even though she tries to sabotage the dates she goes on with Jack, she discovers that she still likes him and he likes her.

The Helping Hands plan a dance and Maggie's mother helps secure a great band. The whole night goes really well and Maggie realizes that even though she chose a group of people that she deemed unpopular, she still likes them and she really likes Jack. Since she's afraid her parents are going to make her move any day, she publicly embarrasses her friends and pretends to be one of the mean girls. Later that same evening Les and Rosie tell Maggie that they've decided to stay in Austin.

Maggie knows that she must do something big to earn back the trust of the Helping Hands, Penny and Jack. During the Homecoming Assembly, in which she has been nominated for Homecoming queen, she takes the microphone and apologizes for her behavior in front of the school. Her friends forgive her and she realizes that it is better to be friends with the awkward and unpopular people. She finishes the remaining school year in Austin and finally feels that her family is "home."



# Chapter One: Act Naturally

## Chapter One: Act Naturally Summary

How Not to Be Popular begins with Sugar Magnolia Dempsey or Maggie in the backseat of her parents' Hearst, sad and distraught as her family drives away from their home in Portland, Oregon. Though Maggie is accustomed to moving frequently, she really loved Portland and her boyfriend Trevor and is devastated by the move. While she sits heartbroken in the backseat as her family heads Southeast and her parents are rattling about the good things to come, she vows to hate Austin and to not make any friends.

On her first day of school, she isolates herself from any of the the popular kids that she would usually become friends with. Even so, a popular boy named Miles, approaches her and she ignores him. He calls her stuck up and she feels that her plan is working. At lunch, she sits with a chubby awkward girl named Penny. Penny irritates her and talks constantly about health ailments and again, Maggie believes that her plan is working.

Shanna, Sharla, and Caitlin are the popular girls in school. They size up Maggie in homeroom and invite her to be on of the Belles. Maggie declines and all three girls are shocked.

## Chapter One: Act Naturally Analysis

In an effort to protect herself from her parents' free-spirited ways, Maggie decides to never get attached to a place again. To do this she believes that she must not make any friends and that if she is successful then it will not hurt when her parents, Les and Rosie, uproot her for a new home and new adventures.

Ironically, what she's trying to do isn't so different than Les and Rosie's Buddhist belief that one should never become attached and that one never owns anything. But, the difference is that instead of allowing things to happen, and appreciating them without attachment, she fights attachment. She fights liking Austin and she fights making friends and becoming attached to people that she initially thought were losers. The fact that Maggie chooses Penny to sit with also says something about the type of person that Maggie is. She is a popular girl. She chooses the loneliest and dorkiest looking girl to sit with because she thinks that this will make the other popular kids—the kids she really does want to be friends with—dislike her.

Likewise, Maggie thinks that Miles is really cute, but ignores him and she's a little disappointed that her new plan to not make friends won't allow her to accept Shanna's invitation to the Belles. Despite all of this, she's sure that her plan is working.



# Chapter Two: Pretty Ugly

## Chapter Two: Pretty Ugly Summary

After her initial day of school and having both Miles and Shanna be nice to her, Maggie decides that she's not working hard enough at being unpopular. She chooses a funky dress that looks like she belongs in a Laura Ingalls Wilder book. Again, Miles confronts her at the entrance to the school. He asks her why she's dressing like that and why she won't talk to him. He taunts her suggesting that she is acting "too good" to be near him.

She sits with Penny again and notices that Penny is wearing a dress that is very similar to the one she wore that morning as a costume. Penny irritates her, but Maggie believes that sitting with Penny everyday will make her more unpopular.

At home she receives a package that she initially thinks is from Trevor, but it isn't. It is just a college information pack from her old guidance counselor in Portland. There's a note and a letter of recommendation and a suggestion that she needs to be involved in clubs once she's in Austin for her college application. The packet from Portland reminds her of Trevor and she spends an evening sulking on her roof in Austin thinking about Portland and her old boyfriend.

## Chapter Two: Pretty Ugly Analysis

Maggie notices that she and Penny are wearing nearly identical dresses and yet Penny is not wearing hers to fend off anybody. Penny does not seem to notice that Maggie is deliberately trying to dress unattractively. Though she dresses like this, Miles still takes notice of her. He does not believe that her funky get up is really her and wants to know why she is throwing everybody off. Maggie surprised and scared by his insight. This demonstrates that Maggie really would fit in with the popular kids if she wasn't trying to so hard not to.

Maggie is still devastated about leaving Portland, more specifically Trevor, her ex-boyfriend. When she receives the college application packet, it reminds her of the plans she and Trevor had to go to the same colleges. She decides she's going to join clubs so that maybe she has a chance of going to college with Trevor. What Maggie is overlooking is that Trevor broke up with her via text message within days of her leaving, before her parents even made it to Austin. Maggie wants to believe that he did it because it was too difficult to have a long-distance relationship, but she still believes that after high school they might get together.



# Chapter Three: Artificial Life

## Chapter Three: Artificial Life Summary

Maggie wakes with a headache and Rosie gives her a rosemary plant to smell to alleviate the pain. At first, Maggie fears that she'll stand out carrying a plant around and then she realizes that that is exactly what she wants. She walks around the entire day carrying and smelling the rosemary plant.

Miles confronts her at school again and she tells him to leave her alone. She eats lunch with Penny, as usual. Penny is interested in Maggie's remedy of a headache with rosemary.

After school she begins thinking about Portland and Trevor. On a whim, she decides to call him. After many rings, Trevor answers the phone. Their conversation is brief and though Maggie misses him doesn't want to sound as if she is desperate. At the end of their conversation, though Trevor was distant, she still believes it is because things are just too hard. She resolves after their conversation to join the Helping Hands club that Penny is a part of. She believes that if she gets a recommendation from the adviser of that club then she can still apply to college and eventually be with Trevor again.

## Chapter Three: Artificial Life Analysis

Maggie still believes that Trevor cares for her just as much as she him. Though she's been away from Portland for a few weeks, she hasn't yet contacted Trevor since he broke up with her via text message. On a whim, during a desperate moment of loneliness, she calls him. Though Trevor says very little in response to her asking about their future in college, she still takes the fact that he outright didn't say he didn't want to still go to the same college as a good sign. She is seeing and hearing what she wants to believe to convince herself as a way of making herself feel better.

Maggie's plan to join the Helping Hands is really a far-fetched plan to get her and Trevor back together. She thinks that if she can get a letter of reference from an adviser then she can apply to the colleges that she and Trevor had talked about. Even without Trevor, joining a club and applying to college would be a good thing for her to do, but right now all of her motivation is stemming from the idea that she can be reunited with Trevor.

Sadly, to the reader it is clear that Trevor is done with Maggie. He broke up with her via text message before her family even reached Austin, hasn't called or text since then and was not eager to speak with her on the phone.



# Chapter Four: Alone Together

## Chapter Four: Alone Together Summary

At the end of the Helping Hands meeting Jack, the president and a student in Maggie's homeroom, comes in late. Jack has been kind to her in homeroom and she's surprised and a little excited to see him there.

The following day she's standing in line to see the new James Bond movie when Jack taps her on the shoulder. He asks her what she is seeing and looking at the reader board she chooses the most boring-sounding movie to deter him from going with her. She chooses a foreign film—coincidentally the very film that Jack is waiting in line to get a ticket for. He suggests that they watch it together and with no way out, she agrees.

At first she is disappointed that she'll have to spend the entire time watching a foreign film with Jack. But, she finds that she enjoyed the movies and she's enjoyed her time with Jack. At one point she even clutches his arm. At the end of the movie, she's smiling and happy and realizes that she's in danger of liking him. She decides to do cartwheels in hopes that she'll scare him off. The elastic on her skirt breaks and her skirt falls down around her ankles.

Jack asks her to go do something after the movie and she declines. Instead, sullen, she walks around downtown Austin. She finds a funky vintage store—similar to the one that her dad manages—and buys a Star Wars lunchbox and backpack. She thinks that these items will surely secure future as a loser at the high school.

## Chapter Four: Alone Together Analysis

Though Jack seems very conservative and not somebody that Maggie would normally go for, she still finds herself attracted to him—and she has fun. Each time she thinks that she might like him she discounts it as her missing Trevor. She does the somersaults at the movies thinking that uptight Jack would be put off by her behavior. Instead, he claps and cheers and then graciously lends her his shirt to secure her skirt around her waist when the elastic breaks.

She walks around Austin sad and depressed. She misses Trevor, but she also thinks that she's beginning to like Jack and Austin. Every time one of these thoughts enters her head, she does what she can to sabotage herself. She's still doing this as part of her plan to hate Austin and not be attached to people or the place.



# Chapter Five: True Lies

## Chapter Five: True Lies Summary

The following day Maggie wears a jumpsuit, the kind that mechanics wear to school, and she carries her new lunchbox and backpack. People stare and snicker like she expected. Miles stops her at the front door and tells her to dress sexy like he knows she wants to. She is slightly disgusted by him and walks by.

At school there is a Helping Hands meeting and as she looks around at all of the students in the meeting, she gets a feeling that she doesn't belong. She wants to ditch Penny and Jack and all of the others, and join the popular kids clubs.

At lunch, Caitlyn keeps staring at her and Maggie doesn't know what she has done wrong. Penny notices and tells Maggie it is because Caitlyn likes Miles and Miles likes Maggie. Caitlyn is jealous of Maggie.

After an after school meeting, Maggie walks home. She enters the store to see Shanna just leaving with a pile of used jeans. Maggie is surprised to see Shanna and at first she acts like she doesn't know Maggie and then she comes back and asks Maggie to not tell anyone. Shanna's father has lost his job and they cannot afford to live the way that they used to.

## Chapter Five: True Lies Analysis

At one point in this chapter, Maggie is wistful for what might have been with the popular crowd. She watches the Bippies—what she calls the beautiful people—and is a little disappointed she has ended up hanging out with Jack and Penny. At one point she even considers, briefly, ditching them at the club. This demonstrates how truly Maggie does not identify with Jack or Penny. It also reveals that her attitude is not much better than Miles, Shanna or Caitlyn's.

Every situation turns out to be advantageous to Maggie. She's using Penny and Jack as shields from being popular and the only reason she joined the Helping Hands is because she needs a reference letter so that she can go to college with Trevor. She's just as advantageous as the other popular kids, but she's not being honest about it. By being on the other side, even if she doesn't feel she fits in, she's realizing what it feels like to not be one of the popular kids. And in this chapter she does not like it.





# Chapter Six: Planned Chaos

## Chapter Six: Planned Chaos Summary

In chapter six, Maggie wears a kimono to school. She is uncomfortable and struggling to breathe. Students are detained in their homeroom classes for standardized testing and Maggie breezes through the test and then struggles to get comfortable as she is reading a paperback. She notices that day that people are wearing galoshes and jumpsuits that are eerily similar to the jumpsuits that she has worn the past few days.

She is called into the principal's office to discuss her wardrobe and Les and Rosie are called in as well. The principal feels that Maggie is dressing intentionally distracting and is angry that the other students are now starting to copy her. Her parents who are free-spirited hippies, argue that she had done nothing wrong, not broken a dress code, and is merely expressing herself. The principal accepts this and allows her to leave. When her parents walk out with the principal they are all acting chummy.

Les and Rosie want to stay for lunch and Maggie thinks that this will be a good idea since it will make her look like a dork. Her father teaches kids how to juggle and her mother tells the girls the importance of vaginal exercises. Maggie is humiliated, but hopes that her plan is working.

After school Maggie goes to water aerobics with Penny. Caitlyn, Shanna and Sharla walk into the locker room and start making fun of Penny's swimsuit. Maggie gets angry and defends Penny. Penny acts as if nothing happens and waits for Maggie to finish getting ready.

## Chapter Six: Planned Chaos Analysis

Maggie is shocked that people like her enough to copy her. She is intentionally dressing bizarre to put people off and then her peers are dressing up at school in the exact same way. This concerns the principal because he fears that people will be unconventional and feel more free to break convention and rules.

Maggie still misses Trevor, but also realizes that she actually likes Jack. This surprises her because she actually thinks that Jack is uptight and too traditional.

When Caitlyn, Sharla and Shanna make fun of Penny, Penny does nothing. Maggie notices that she doesn't look sad or offended, or anything. Maggie is very angry that the girls would say such a thing and can't believe that Penny doesn't stand up for herself. Penny is a foil for Maggie's character. She's plain, but totally comfortable with herself. She does not concern herself with popularity and even when others are rude to her, she remains calm and kind.



# Chapter Seven: Cold Sweat

## Chapter Seven: Cold Sweat Summary

On a Saturday the Helping Hands club volunteers to pick up trash at a popular Austin park. Everything is going fine until the Bippies show up. Miles comes up to Maggie and tries to grab her arm and convince her that she should be with them swimming and not picking up trash. He won't back off so she tells him that she'll poke him if she doesn't back off. Caitlyn chimes in and starts making fun of the Helping Hands until Maggie calls her trash. Miles and Caitlyn storm away furious.

After the Helping Hands leaves the park they go to Mrs. Pratt's where Jack and Mrs. Pratt express concern that Maggie seems really unhappy and that she is trying to isolate herself. Jack asks Maggie on a date in front of Mrs. Pratt and Maggie feels obligated to say yes.

Later that evening, Maggie gets an email from her good friend, Lorraine, in Portland. Lorraine writes that Trevor already has a girlfriend. He is dating Maggie's old enemy and a girl she thinks is shallow and vapid.

## Chapter Seven: Cold Sweat Analysis

Maggie is angry that the Helping Hands are picked on and that Bippies think that they can get away with it. What is ironic is that this is the group of people Maggie would normally be friends with. The only reason she is with the Helping Hands is because she herself has labeled them losers as well. Through this process Maggie is realizing just how shallow she was, how mean she was and actually still is since technically she is using the people who now think that she is their friend.

Lorraine informs Maggie that Trevor has already started dated someone else, someone that Maggie doesn't like. She's hurt by this and a little surprised. She is beginning to see her own attachment to Trevor different now, realizing that they didn't have such a great relationship as she thought.



# Chapter Eight: Terribly Good

## Chapter Eight: Terribly Good Summary

Jack takes Maggie on a date to a Japanese restaurant. She informs him that she is a vegetarian and he also tries to not eat meat. He accommodates her and is respectful of her opinions and choices. Maggie doesn't really want to be on this date but goes along with it because Mrs. Pratt is worried about her and Maggie wants her to write a letter of recommendation.

On their date, Maggie keeps bringing up topics that she think will anger or make Jack uncomfortable, but neither happens. At one point in the conversation, he points out that Maggie is the one who is being judgmental,

After dinner they go to a park and she's still trying to make Jack uncomfortable so she wades into a pond. She slips and falls and he comes in after her. He also falls in. They dry off and he takes her home. When he drops her off, he kisses her and she kisses him back.

## Chapter Eight: Terribly Good Analysis

Maggie is learning that getting everyone to not like her takes a lot of energy and that actually the people she has made friends with—whom she initially cast as dorks and losers—she wants them to like her. She's beginning to second-guess her plan of avoiding making friends. But, every time she's ready to abandon the plan, she recalls the hurt and heartache of what it felt like the last time she moved.

During Jack and Maggie's date, Maggie does everything to make Jack uncomfortable by doing crazy things and bringing up volatile topics. But, Jack is not ruffled. He answers her questions openly and seems charmed by her quirky behavior. After the date when he kisses her, Maggie realizes that she really does like him. This scares her and she vows to never let it happen again. Ironically, this causes her pain too, just as getting attached and leaving him would.



# Chapter Nine: Old News

## Chapter Nine: Old News Summary

Maggie pretends to be sick for the three following days after Jack kissed her. When she returns to school everyone is excited about an announcement that is about to be made. In the bathroom Maggie overhears Sharla crying because she has learned that she is not one of the Homecoming nominees. Just minutes later in homeroom the principal interrupts with the Homecoming nomination announcements. Maggie has been nominated. She's shocked and a little upset that her plan is backfiring.

Maggie learns that the school ran the interview that happened a few weeks back in the school newspaper. Instead of sounding bizarre and dorky, the article makes her sound hip and cool, confident and free-spirited. Many people are now carrying character lunchboxes and backpacks, wearing galoshes, quirky dresses and jumpsuits.

After being negative at the Helping Hands meeting, Maggie decides to get the announcements printed for the dance and surprise everyone. She stops off at a coffee shop for a chai latte and runs into Miles. Miles tells her she's sexy and he knows that who she's pretending to be isn't who she really is.

As she's leaving she accidentally drops a flyer. The following day the Helping Hands learn that the Belles have moved their fundraising dance up to the same date as the Helping Hands' Halloween dance and that the Belles have stolen their DJ. They found out about all of this from the flyer Maggie dropped in the cafe.

## Chapter Nine: Old News Analysis

Ironically who everyone thinks Maggie is is who her parents would be proud of. The article portrayed Maggie as being free-spirited confident and non-judgmental. But, readers know that this isn't entirely who she is. She intentionally said wacky and controversial things to get people to not like her. She's shocked that it had the opposite effect. When she asks the kids from the Helping Hands club, they say that people like her because she is 'real.'

Maggie feels guilty because she is judgmental. She specifically chose the people she is becoming friends with because she thought they were losers and would protect her from being popular. She thought that they were people that she wouldn't actually want to become friends with. She's been keeping all of this from her parents with whom she normally tells everything because she knows that they would be disappointed in her.



# Chapter Ten: Fine Mess

## Chapter Ten: Fine Mess Summary

The Helping Hands find out about the Belles stealing their date and the DJ. Everyone is feeling like the dance will be a failure and they consider canceling it. Maggie feels especially guilty because the reason that the Belles are targeting them is because of Maggie and Maggie was the one who dropped the flier.

Maggie tells Les and Rosie about the dance. They aren't convinced that the Belle's dance will be more popular. They try to cheer Maggie up but she goes to her room and pouts for the afternoon.

Later, Shanna comes into the store and apologizes for the behavior of Caitlyn and Sharla, she also apologizes for stealing their DJ.

## Chapter Ten: Fine Mess Analysis

In this brief chapter, Maggie tries to distance herself from the people she is starting to see as friends. She likes Jack but is afraid to get attached and she asks him for space and ignores him. With the Helping Hands, she feels defeated and like she's the one who has messed everything up.

Maggie is a little frustrated with Les and Rosie. They really don't see why Maggie assumes that the Belles' dance will be better. She tries to explain about popularity and all that and still they're unsure of why she's so confident that her dance will fail.

Maggie is at a crossroads of what to do. She knows that if she continues to spend time with Jack and Penny and the Helping Hands that she's just going to get more and more attached.



# Chapter Eleven: Live Recording

## Chapter Eleven: Live Recording Summary

After Maggie tells Rosie that she thinks the Halloween dance is going to be a failure, Rosie gets the Golly Bums, a popular band, to agree to play for the Helping Hands since the money raised goes to music and art programs. Maggie tells the Helping Hands and everyone is ecstatic.

Maggie dresses as Princess Amidala from a costume at the vintage store. But, on her way to the dance she learns that the local television station wants to run a clip of the Golly Bums and are willing to put in a plug about the dance.

Jack goes with her and Maggie is briefly on television. She's excited that he's there with her and for a moment she forgets that she wants space from him.

## Chapter Eleven: Live Recording Analysis

To the Helping Hands, Maggie is literally and metaphorically a hero. She has saved the dance and she dresses as Princess Amidala from Star Wars. All of the dorky sci-fi boys think that she is the greatest thing ever. Things are going very well for Maggie.

The one thing that does bother her is that she told Jack that she needed space. She actually likes him but she's afraid of getting hurt. The only reason that she asked for space is because of this. She expects that he will put up a fight and tell her not to worry about it but instead he says okay and actually gives her space. She's disappointed by this.



# Chapter Twelve: Found Missing

## Chapter Twelve: Found Missing Summary

The Golly Bums perform at the Helping Hands dance and all of the publicity works. The dance was a success. Maggie enjoys her success and she and Jack dance together. While she is dancing with him she is really happy, the happiest that she has been in a very long time.

Her happiness freaks her out and she and Jack separate and she runs off to a quiet corner of the room. Some girls who are with Shanna walk in and start talking to her and telling her how great the dance is and how cool that she got the Golly Bums to play. Miles shows up too and she kisses Miles. Her friends from the Helping Hands walk in and Shanna and her friends start making fun of them. Instead of standing up for them, Maggie makes fun of them too.

At first her friends are confused by why she being mean, but then they believe it. Jack comes and sees what Maggie has done. Jack and Penny and the others walk off upset and disappointed and hurt. Maggie leaves and cries the entire way home.

## Chapter Twelve: Found Missing Analysis

Maggie is so happy in the moment that she is kissing Jack on the dance floor that it freaks her out. She realizes that when she moves, she'll be devastated by the break up. She leaves Jack on the dance floor to find a quiet place to think. She knows that she needs to sabotage the situation because, already, she cares too much.

When she finds Shanna walk in with some of her friends and then hears them being mean to Penny and the Helping Hands, she sees this as a perfect opportunity to lose her friends. She makes fun of them so that they wouldn't like her, so that she truly will not have any friends. She realizes that she no longer fears being one of the popular kids because it is those people that she wouldn't really want to be with.



# Chapter Thirteen: Open Secret

## Chapter Thirteen: Open Secret Summary

The following morning Maggie stays in bed and cries. She's upset that she's lost her friends but more so that she's hurt them. Rosie and Les come in midmorning to check on her and tell her the exciting news that they've decided to stay in Austin. This upsets Maggie even more.

In the afternoon she recognizes that she needs to do clean up, both metaphorically and literally. She goes to the Bingo hall to apologize and help clean up decorations. She apologizes but no one listens to her and she leaves feeling more dejected than ever.

## Chapter Thirteen: Open Secret Analysis

Though she has finally been honest with her friends about trying to not get attached to people, she's hurt them even more because now they know that the reason she chose them to be friends with in the first place is because she thought they were unlovable. Jack is protective of the group and believes that Maggie should leave them alone. She's surprised by how he's not forgiving of her.

She naively assumes that once she apologizes they will all forgive her, but they don't and she plans on doing something to truly make it up to them.





# Chapter Fourteen: Stop-Motion

## Chapter Fourteen: Stop-Motion Summary

The following week is the Homecoming court nominations and Maggie has been nominated. The princesses sit on the stage as the principal introduces them. Maggie asks if she can say something and takes the microphone. Maggie admits how fake she was, how mean she was and she apologizes publicly to the people she hurt. Penny watches her the whole time and still sits with her at lunch that day.

That evening at the Homecoming game Shanna wins, but Maggie is happy to be there with her friends in a place that she can call home.

## Chapter Fourteen: Stop-Motion Analysis

Maggie publicly apologizes and admits what a fraud she was because she knows that is the only way that she can come clean with herself and those she hurt. Through her honesty, she has regained the trust of the Helping Hands, Penny and Jack. This also demonstrates to Maggie that these are real friends.

By the end of the book, Maggie has changed and she also has a more permanent home. All ends well.



# Characters

## Maggie

Maggie Dempsey's real name is Sugar Magnolia. But, she prefers Maggie. Her parents Les and Rosie are free-spirited hippies and although Maggie appreciates the freedom that they allow her, she also understands how unconventional they are. Her family has moves around the country, never settling in one place longer than four months. This time, after leaving Portland for Austin, she has decided that she's no longer going to get attached to Austin as home or the people there as friends.

From how Maggie describes herself, she is significantly more conventional than her parents. She always fits in with the popular crowd, but is never the alpha female. She's usually just one of the popular girls on the periphery. She dates the popular guys and eschews the stereotypical geeks and dorks like everybody else. In Austin since she's intentionally trying to not make friends, she chooses to spend time with the stereotypical losers and dorks.

She befriends Penny because Penny is awkward, dresses differently and is alone. She joins the Helping Hands because she needs a teacher recommendation and it looks like the most uncool club in the school. As she gets to know the misfits at the school, she begins to like them. This catches her off guard. She continually fights her own feelings of wanting to belong and call Austin home because she thinks that if she doesn't get attached then it won't hurt when she moves.

Maggie learns that she's just as mean and cruel as the Bippies. She learns that she's been using Jack and Penny and Mrs.Pratt all along. And she disappoints the people that look up to her the most. She realizes that she's rather be herself in the uncool group than be one of the Bippies. And she knows that even though their lives look perfect that they have problems too.

## Rosie

Rosie is Maggie's mother. She's a one-dimensional character who is always happy and free-spirited. She and her husband believe that nothing is ever owned and that to claim something is dangerous. She has spent much of her adult life moving around and experiencing different places in the country. She wants the best for Maggie but doesn't fully understand what Maggie is going through.

Rosie is always portrayed as a happy person in the novel. She believes in natural healing and often has quirky ways in which she's going to help Maggie feel better. She believes that life is too short to not be happy.



## Les

Les is Maggie's father and is married to Rosie. Like Rosie, Les is a one-dimensional character. He holds two graduate degrees in education and psychology, but manages a vintage clothing store for his friend. Nothing is mentioned about his past jobs.

Les wants what is best for Maggie but sense that she isn't telling him something.

## Jack

Jack is Maggie's boyfriend at her new high school in Austin. Initially Maggie thinks that Jack is too conservative and uptight, but she grows to learn that he dresses like a businessman because he has an internship in a law office. That he stands up for teachers because he thinks other students are being disrespectful, and that he is more open-minded than she originally thought.

Though Maggie expects Jack to be turned off by her intentionally disarming behavior, he goes along with it. Jack is so reserved that he appreciates how outgoing and spontaneous Maggie is. When Maggie asks for space, he is bewildered but agrees because he respects her wishes.

## Penny

Maggie chooses to sit next to Penny on the first day of school because Penny looks like a loner. No one is sitting next to her, she is chubby and awkward and talks about health concerns all of the time. Maggie is embarrassed for her.

As Maggie gets to know Penny she learns that Penny is extremely loyal and kind. Penny won't even say anything mean or negative to Caitlyn and Sharla when they are mean to her. Penny helps out and volunteers her time to serve others without broadcasting it and without seeking any kind of recognition or accolades.

## Miles

Miles is the most popular guy at Maggie's high school in Austin. He likes Maggie and know that she's not really who she's pretending to be. Miles comments about Maggie needing to dress "sexy" suggests that he's sexist and disrespectful to women.

## Caitlyn

Caitlyn is the alpha mean girl at the high school. She has had an on-again off-again relationship with Miles. She is infuriated that Miles likes Maggie, whom Caitlyn things is a freaky loser.



## **Shanna**

Shanna is part of the popular girls' clique, but she's often a quiet bystander. Shanna reveals to Maggie that her father has recently lost his job and she's having a difficult time maintaining that nothing is wrong. She's not able to keep up with the styles of the more popular affluent girls anymore.

## **Mrs. Pratt**

Mrs. Pratt is the adviser for the Helping Hands. She cares about kids, specifically Maggie. She's unlike the other kids in that she doesn't allow the popular kids to live by a different set of rules. This makes her an un-favorite teacher at the high school

## **Drip**

Drip is a female member of the Helping Hands. She's small and tough and looks up to Maggie. When Maggie betrays the Helping Hands, it is Drip who stands up for everyone.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Portland, Oregon**

Portland, Oregon is where Maggie lived before she moved to Austin, Texas.

### **Austin, Texas**

Maggie and her family move to Austin, Texas, which is the main setting of the book.

### **Bippies**

The Bippies are the nickname that Maggie gives to the popular kids.

### **Helping Hands**

Helping Hands is a club that volunteers to help others.

### **Hippies**

Maggie's parents are hippies. They're free-spirited and open to adventures in life.

### **Vintage Clothing Store**

Les, Maggie's father, manages a hip second-hand vintage store. She takes her quirky outfits from here.

### **Golly Bums**

The Golly Bums are a local, popular band. Maggie gets them to play at the Helping Hands Halloween dance.

### **Water Aerobics**

Maggie goes to water aerobics with Penny.



## **Halloween Dance**

The Belles try to sabotage the Helping Hands Halloween dance by stealing their DJ. The Halloween dance is the largest fundraiser of the year.

## **Belles**

The Belles are a club for the popular girls.

## **Star Wars Lunchbox**

Maggie buys a Star Wars Lunchbox to look dorky, but other students begin copying her.

## **Cafeteria**

Maggie meets Penny in the cafeteria. Social status within the school becomes very clear here.

# Themes

## Home

One of the central themes in "How Not to Be Popular" is the concept of home. Rosie and Les believe that there is too much of the world to stay in one place and that the ability to get up and leave is an adventure. Because of this, Maggie has lived all over the country and experienced many different types of lifestyles, but she also feels untethered. For many years as a child she has gone along with it, but after leaving her last and favorite home Portland, Oregon and her boyfriend, Trevor—she has had enough.

Desperate to not get attached to another place, she makes a plan to hate Austin. But, even in the first weeks, she's enjoying the new place that she inevitably feels will never be a real home, just a transient stopping place on her parents' list of places to live and see. She likes the sunshine and the city, and she's desperately trying to avoid making friends. She wants to hate Austin so that she doesn't get attached to this new temporary home and then get hurt.

She thinks that she'll only be in Austin for 4 months—like everywhere else she has lived. She's mean to the people that she has grown closest to and hopes that her family will move soon so she doesn't have to face the mess of her life that she's made. When Les and Rosie tell Maggie that they've decided to stay and make Austin a permanent home for a few years, Maggie is both elated and devastated. She's wasted the last four months anguishing over the fact that she's falling in love with a place and people that she will have to eventually leave. In the end, because she's acted against what she knows is right, she's hurt her friends and created much unnecessary drama.

In the end, everything works out, not just because her friends have forgiven her, but because finally, she has a place to call home and she's no longer afraid of becoming attached to the physical place and its people.

## Popularity & Fitting In

Though Maggie has been to many different high schools, she has never had a difficult time fitting in or being popular. But to dislike Austin, she feels that she must make herself an outcast. After her first day of school, she simply avoided the "cool" kids and still they approached her. This suggests that Maggie is attractive and confident if the other popular kids are approaching her on the first day of school. Since this happens, she decides that in order to really be an outcast, then she's going to begin dressing bizarrely. She picks awkward outfits from the second-hand vintage store that her father manages.

After the first few days, she goes get bizarre looks and students snicker as she walks by. But, by the second week she notices that people begin copying her. She finds this



unbelievable and possibly a coincidence. A student interviews her for the school newspaper and Maggie gives the most bizarre answers and even criticizes how the popular kids shouldn't have any power—that people should feel free to do and be who they want—ironically the very thing that her parents have been teaching and showing her her whole life. But, she says it because she thinks it will ostracize her further.

Her plan backfires and even more students begin dressing like her in the bizarre outfits. She's stunned by this. People applaud the article when it comes out. She asks some of the students from the Helping Hands club why people weren't angry, and her peers tell her that people liked how real and confident she is. Of course, Maggie can't believe this because she was intentionally trying to not be popular.

By the end of the novel Maggie realizes that her behavior is just as bad as the Bippies (popular kids). She intentionally chooses people that she doesn't think she'll ever really want to be friends with to be involved with. Her idea is that she could never become attached to them, so that when she moves it won't hurt. She chooses the kids that are stereotypical dorks. At the dance, she learns that she was initially just using them, but now that she's gotten to know them that she actually likes them.

## Friendship

Normally Maggie becomes friends with the popular kids when she enters a new school. Now that she's trying not to become popular, she realizes that she became friends with the cool kids with little difficulty. She doesn't want friends in Austin. She thinks that if she doesn't have any friends then she won't be sad when her parents are ready to pick up and move.

Maggie chooses to sit next to Penny at lunchtimes because Maggie believes that if she sits next to Penny, then no one else will want to be her friends. As the time goes on, Maggie realizes what a good friend Penny really is. Penny is fiercely loyal and generous. She waits for Maggie—even though she hates to be late—at swim aerobics. She delivers meals and mows the lawn of an elderly woman who has surgery. She stands up for her friends. When people say and do mean things to her, she ignores the comments and carries on.

Maggie joins the club Helping Hands because she needs a letter of recommendation for college and because it is misfits and dorks who are in the club. But, after spending Saturdays cleaning up parks and planning a dance, and other activities that involve helping others, Maggie begins enjoying herself. When they are confronted in the park, Maggie takes up for them and in return they are very loyal to her. She hurts these people at the dance when she makes fun of them in front of all of the popular kids.

When she returns to school she realizes that these kids that she thought she would never want to be friends with, are actually the best and most loyal friends that she could have.



# Style

## Point of View

How Not to Be Popular is written from the first-person perspective of Maggie in both the present and past tenses. Maggie has just moved from Portland, Oregon to Austin, Texas. And has vowed to not make any friends in Texas. Everything she does her first few weeks of school is to make it so that she is unpopular.

She has moved a lot in her previous three years of high school and does not want to be devastated by the moves anymore. Even though she's trying to find people that are dorks and losers so that the popular kids won't like her, she's finding that she likes the so-called dorks and losers that she's aligned herself with.

Many times a popular girl in the other high schools, now that she's not part of that crowd, she's seeing what it is like to be on the other end of the social spectrum. The Helping Hands kids are dorks, and they are teased, and bullied and Maggie finds herself standing up to kids that are being mean to them, the type of popular girl that she may have had she decided to not try and be unpopular.

In this book Maggie realizes what it is like to feel invisible. Ironically, however, through her befriending the outcasts and standing up to the bullies, Maggie has become popular with all of the other kids, including the kids who are on the periphery of social popularity.

## Setting

The novel begins with Maggie in the back of her parents retrofitted Hearst heading to Austin. The physical setting of Portland, Oregon only occurs in flashbacks with Trevor. In Austin, her family lives in an apartment above the vintage clothing store that her father manages. It is a small apartment that is in the commercial downtown area of Austin. Near the shop and apartment are other cool, funky coffee shops and clothing stores. It is described as a hip place in Austin.

Maggie can walk to school as well as the movie theater and other shops and restaurants. Based on the fact that other students drive cars, it seems like Maggie is the only person of her peers that lives downtown.

This is set in modern times. This is evident based on social context and the reference to things like cell phones and text messages, etc.



## Language and Meaning

The language is modern English appropriate to a high school girl now. However, Maggie sometimes uses advanced vocabulary and has alluded to her love of reading. Her extensive vocabulary enforces the notion that she is intelligent.

Modern references like text message and cell phones are also used.

## Structure

The novel is divided into fourteen brief chapters. Most chapters span the time of one day and are ordered chronologically.

Occasionally there will be a flashback embedded within a chapter, most of the flashbacks are in reference to Trevor. As time goes on, the flashbacks become less and less frequent, until at one point a few chapters go by and she has not thought of Trevor, and the text has had no flashbacks.

The novel is equal parts action with reflection.



## Quotes

"Life is short, so why not see as much as possible?" "Humans aren't meant to stay in one place. If we were, we'd be plants" (Chapter 1, p. 6).

"Sometimes I think I don't know myself well enough to figure out what I should be" (Chapter 1, p. 9).

"Could I stand not being one of the "normal" kids? I've always been popular, at least a little bit, and I've never, ever been a complete loser. So if I wanted to become one on purpose...could I even pull it off" (Chapter 1, p. 11).

"TIP: Popular girls never go anywhere by themselves. Thus, it must also stand to reason that the unpopular are always alone" (Chapter 1, p. 12).

"I realized yesterday that it's not enough to not seek popularity. I have to actively pursue unpopularity. And dressing like a loser is the quickest and easiest way to make people keep their distance" (Chapter 2, p. 37).

"I've done the catty, behind-your-back talk myself at other schools. It's sort of standard behavior if you want to be part of the incrowd—a way of constantly reminding people that you're on top" (Chapter 2, p. 41).

"I can't believe I'm here, with these people, wearing a dorky rubber cap and moving like a marionette. If my cool friends from the past could see this, they'd disown me forever" (Chapter 2, p. 54).

"I love Rosie and Les, but I also can't help hating them a little" (Chapter 2, p. 62).

"But 'miss' implies ownership - that someone or some place has control over you, as if you're tied to it. And that's not real love. Real love is all positive and free" (Chapter 3, p. 71).

"What is with the divas at this school? Why is Caitlyn giving me a hard time when it's obvious I'm no threat? Are they just extra cruel here in Austin, or are they clueless about popularity rules too" (Chapter 5, p. 113).

"Then there should be over two thousand different styles. Instead you have ten percent of the population telling the other ninety percent how they should dress and act! How stupid is that? It takes zero brains to get someone else's haircut. Real style is all about being yourself. It takes guts" (Chapter 5, p. 115).

"TIP: Unpopularity is a state of mind. Feel nerdy. Think uncool thoughts. It also helps to use the word "vaginal" a lot" (Chapter 6, p. 130).

"And maybe, even though I would have been at the mercy of strangers, I could have been happier as a stray in Portland" (Chapter 7, p. 163).



"TIP: Boyfriends are strictly forbidden. If you find yourself accidentally out on a date, sabotage it with all your might. If all else fails, show pictures of your bare butt" (Chapter 8, p. 189).

"It's just hilarious. You hating all Republicans because they're so intolerant" (Chapter 8, p. 201).

"I've gone and done the exact thing I promised myself I wouldn't do: I've found something to like about Austin" (Chapter 8, p. 220).

"TIP: Revel in grossness. Leave food in your teeth. Proudly display feminine hygiene products" (Chapter 9, p. 221).

"You either take something or leave something. But if you take leave, what happens to the something? Does it get canceled out? Maybe that's why I'm so tired. I'm literally being used up" (Chapter 9, p. 236).

"He says this with such total conviction all I can do is stare back at him. I'm seriously freaked now. It's as if Miles just barged into my mind, kicked up his feet, and started reading my innermost thoughts" (Chapter 9, p. 240).

"TIP: Align yourself with the lowly and meek. Piss off the powerful" (Chapter 10, p. 248).

"TIP: Be a horrible, treacherous, conniving person" (Chapter 12, p. 282).

"An awful thought occurs to me, bringing on a severe case of the Stabbies: I failed. I had this wonderful plan to hate this place and to be hated too. Only now look at me. I'm dancing with Mr. Wrong, who feels like Mr. Right, partying with a group of kids I shouldn't like but do. I'm having the best time ever. And the worst part is it doesn't mean anything! Apparently love and friendship can be cleansed from your system the way toxins are flushed out of your liver by Rosie's herbs. Nothing matters" (Chapter 12, p. 290).

"So I joined the Helping Hands - the "loser" club. But these people are the real losers! These are the ones I won't be sad to leave behind. If only I'd chosen them" (Chapter 12, p. 292).

"Don't back down, I tell myself. If you do, it'll hurt even worse when you leave" (Chapter 12, p. 302).

"TIP: Screw up all your chances at friendship. Be a sorry-assed bitch" (Chapter 13, p. 303).

"That's it. There's nothing I can do. Everyone hates me and I deserve it. I literally asked for it" (Chapter 13, p. 317).

"TIP: Cry in front of two thousand people. Tell the scary, embarrassing truth" (Chapter 14, p. 318).



## Topics for Discussion

How does Maggie change throughout the book? What is her catalyst for change?

Why is it ironic that the school thinks she is being "real" in the article for the school newspaper?

Are Les and Rosie round or flat characters? Explain.

Are Miles and Shanna round or flat characters? Explain.

Why does Maggie suddenly start keeping secrets from Les and Rosie?

How are Les and Rosie different than other parents? How does this affect Maggie's character?

Why does Maggie have a hard time accepting that she likes Jack? Why does she initially think that she can't like Jack?

Why does Maggie choose to be friends with Penny? Why does she choose to join the Helping Hands?

Is Maggie more like the characters from the Helping Hands or the Bippies? Explain.

How does Maggie solve her crisis? Does she do enough?

Why does she turn against her friends? Why is she surprised to call them her friends?

What does Maggie realize about her and Trevor's relationship? What takes her so long to learn this?

Why do the people at Maggie's school copy her crazy behavior? What does this say about the others and the culture of high schools?