

# **When You Reach Me Study Guide**

## **When You Reach Me by Rebecca Stead**

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# Plot Summary

When You Reach Me is a novel by acclaimed writer Rebecca Stead. In this novel, Miranda begins receiving strange notes hidden in her own possessions by an unknown person. At first Miranda is frightened by these notes, but soon she becomes intrigued, determined to find out who is sending the notes and why. The answer, when it finally comes, will be the biggest surprise of all. When You Reach Me is a coming of age novel that dabbles a little in time travel and the surreal, a novel that will leave readers as anxious as Miranda to solve each mystery, the notes and as well as some of the more common mysteries of childhood.

Miranda is a middle school student who has had the same best friend since she was a baby. Her best friend, Sal, lives downstairs in the same building where Miranda and her mother live. However, one day while walking home, Sal was punched by a bigger kid and he ran home, telling Miranda he thought they should not be friends for a while.

At the same time Miranda and Sal stop being friends, Annemarie, a girl in Miranda's class, stopped being friends with her best friend, Julia. For this reason, Miranda asks Annemarie to sit with her at lunch. In a short time, Miranda and Annemarie become good friends, spending afternoons in each other's homes.

At home, Miranda's mother is set on becoming a contestant on a television show called The \$20,000 Pyramid. Every night Miranda and her mother's boyfriend, Richard, help her mom practice for the show. The practice begins to pay off when Miranda's mother receives a postcard informing her that she has been scheduled to appear on the show the following April.

Miranda and Annemarie go to lunch on occasion with another kid, Colin. Colin gets it into his head to get them all a job at a local sandwich shop. Colin talks the owner of the shop to allow all three of them to work in the shop during their lunch hour each day. In payment, the shop owner allows them one soda and a sandwich made with vegetables and cheese.

One day at the sandwich shop, Colin looks inside a ceramic bank that the shop owner has told them to leave alone. Inside is dozens of two dollar bills folded into triangles. Colin finds this amusing, but Annemarie is terrified they will be caught just looking at it.

Julia comes to the sandwich shop a few times. The owner does not like her being there and often tells her to leave. When Julia asks for a job, the owner refuses. This makes Miranda happy because she dislikes Julia. However, when Miranda later learns that the owner dislikes Julia because she is black, Miranda begins to rethink her own opinions of Julia.

One afternoon when she comes home from school, Miranda finds the door to her apartment open. Miranda is frightened, but when she finds nothing missing, she decides her mother must have forgotten to relock the door. Later, however, when Miranda finds



a note sticking out of one of her schoolbooks, she begins to wonder. When she tells her mother, Miranda's mother thinks of the spare key they keep in a fire hose down the hall. When they check, it is gone.

Miranda finds another note some time later in a bag of buns she is counting at the sandwich shop. A third note appears in the pocket of one of her jackets. These notes ask Miranda to write a story, but Miranda has no idea who these notes could be from.

After the bank is stolen from the sandwich shop, Miranda and her friends lose their job. They attempt to apologize, but when they realize the owner is prejudiced against blacks, they decide they do not want to work for him any longer.

As Miranda walks home one afternoon, she watches as the boy who punched Sal attempts to stop him on the street to apologize. Sal becomes frightened and runs. Sal runs in front of a truck and should be run over, but a homeless man who has been living outside Miranda's building kicks him and moves him out of the way just in time. In the aftermath, Miranda finds a fourth note in the man's shoe, a shoe stolen from her own apartment. It is soon after this that Miranda realizes the homeless man is one of her friends, a time traveler whose mind has been affected by his travels.



# Chapters 1-4

## Chapters 1-4 Summary

The novel is set in the late 1970s when a television game show called The \$20,000 Pyramid, hosted by Dick Clark, was still shown throughout the country weekday mornings. It is this game show that Miranda's mother attempts to become a contestant on.

In chapter one, Miranda compares a postcard that has come from the producers of The \$20,000 Pyramid to one of four odd notes she has received over the past few months. One of these notes predicts accurately the date on which Miranda's mother will be asked to appear on the show.

Chapter two shows that Miranda is the daughter of a single woman who works in a law office and dates one of the lawyers. Miranda's mother takes lots of office supplies from the office where she works, leaving Miranda and Richard convinced that she is terribly unhappy with her job. Miranda thinks her mother needs to hurry and win money on the game show.

In chapter three, Miranda is convinced she is named after a criminal because of the list of a criminal's rights called the Miranda Rights. At the same time, Miranda recalls how she was once locked out of her apartment after school because she forgot her key. For this reason, Miranda's mother has hidden a key in the fire hose down the hall. Miranda has been asked in one of the mystery notes to mention this key in the story she has been asked to write.

In chapter four, Miranda and Richard spend several hours each evening helping Miranda's mother practice for The \$20,000 Pyramid. This particular night, however, is the monthly tenants' meeting in which all the tenants get together and complain about the building. After each of these meetings, Miranda's mother writes a letter to the landlord that is mostly ignored. Miranda knows her mother hates living in this building because she has told her often how dirty the apartment was when they first moved in. The only good thing was Louisa, another single mother living downstairs, and her son, Sal.

## Chapters 1-4 Analysis

In these chapters, the reader meets Miranda, the main character of the story. Miranda tells her story in the first person in chapters that are quick and short. Miranda is a middle school student who lives with a single mother. Miranda's mother was a law student when she became pregnant and had to drop out. This point is important because Miranda's mother now works in a law firm, but as a receptionist. Miranda's mother is saddened by her position in life and this motivates many of her actions throughout the novel.



Miranda has been receiving notes from an unknown source and this novel is written as though Miranda is speaking to this mysterious person. The content of the notes is unknown at this point, but Miranda mentions that the author of the notes has asked for Miranda to mention the location of a spare key to her apartment and the date on which her mother will appear on The \$20,000 Pyramid. This suggests knowledge of the future, something it will be important for the reader to remember as the plot continues to develop.



# Chapters 5-12

## Chapters 5-12 Summary

In chapter five, Miranda tells the reader about Sal, Louisa's son, who has been her best friend since they were both babies. At the same time, Miranda tells the reader about Quack, a homeless man who likes to sleep with his head under the mailbox outside their building. Miranda and some of the kids call him Quack because he acts oddly and often will kick at nothing.

In chapter six, Louisa often brings lists from the day's Pyramid for Miranda's mother to practice with.

In chapter seven, Miranda thinks the story the mysterious note writer wants to know begins with the day she and Sal were walking home together and a big boy she had never seen before punched Sal twice for no reason. Sal ran home, embarrassed. When Miranda knocked on his door, Sal told her he thought they should take a break from being friends.

Chapter eight shows that when Miranda is afraid of someone on the street, she will often ask them the time.

In chapter nine, Miranda continues to help her mother practice for the game show. Miranda's mother has a list of things she would like to do with the money she might win, including a trip to China.

In chapter ten, Miranda is walking home alone the day after Sal was punched and the same boy comes walking up behind her. Miranda asks him the time and he guesses based on where the sun is in the sky.

In chapter eleven, Sal has begun playing basketball alone after school. At school, Miranda befriends Annemarie because she has just had a break from her best friend, Julia, as well. Miranda and Annemarie have lunch together and then Annemarie asks Miranda to her house.

In chapter twelve, Miranda learns that Annemarie's father stays home all day because he is a medical illustrator. Annemarie's father likes to cook. Miranda notices that Annemarie's father does not give her the apple cider that he has fixed for Miranda.

## Chapters 5-12 Analysis

The reader learns from Miranda her family's routines, including the relationship between her mother and Richard, the mother's boyfriend. It is a close relationship, but Miranda's mother will not give Richard a key, suggesting a reluctance to trust. Miranda's mother is

clearly a strong willed woman who has been independent for a very long time; therefore, it is difficult for her to trust anyone.

Miranda also tells the reader, as well as the mystery note writer, how Sal got punched on the way home from school one October afternoon. This seems to have been the catalyst that has caused Miranda and Sal to stop being friends, but the reader should note that Miranda had to rush to catch up with Sal that day and it was not the first time he began walking home without her. As a result of her break from Sal, Miranda befriends Annemarie, a girl in her class who has also had a falling out with her best friend, Julia. This is an important new relationship for Miranda, as she tells the reader. This is Miranda's first female friend even though she is in sixth grade.





# Chapters 13-20

## Chapters 13-20 Summary

In chapter thirteen, Miranda's mother practices the speed round again and does well.

In chapter fourteen, Miranda volunteers to help in the office. Miranda is assigned to get the kids with dentist appointments out of class and take them to the dentist's office at the back of the school. One of the kids on the list is a boy named Marcus, who turns out to be the boy who punched Sal. Miranda talks to him for a few minutes and he asks about the book she is always carrying around. It is a book about time travel. Marcus suggests that time travel might be possible.

In chapter fifteen, Colin, a boy in Miranda's class, begins having lunch with her and Annemarie. One day Colin convinces the owner of a sandwich shop to give him, Miranda, and Annemarie a job at the shop during their lunch hour. For payment, the shop owner allows them to make a sandwich out of the setup tray and take a soda.

In chapter sixteen, Miranda returns home to find the apartment door unlocked. When Miranda does not find anything missing, she thinks her mother forgot to lock it. However, her mother insists she locked the door. They check the fire hose and discover the spare key is gone.

In chapter seventeen, Miranda finds a note sticking out of one of her school books. The note asks her to write a letter to the author of the note and mention the location of the house key. Miranda shows it to her mother who thinks it was intended for someone else.

In chapter eighteen, Annemarie and Colin are allowed to begin serving customers, but Miranda has to count the rolls because she cannot make the V cut the owner of the shop requires.

In chapter nineteen, Miranda invites Annemarie to her apartment. Miranda sees her apartment through Annemarie's eyes and is embarrassed. Afterward, Miranda's mother takes Annemarie home and is charmed by her father.

In chapter twenty, Miranda finds a second note in the bag of rolls she has to count at the sandwich shop. This note asks Miranda to write a story about events that have not yet taken place. The note also asks that Miranda not show the note to anyone. This frightens Miranda. Later, Colin sneaks a peek in the ceramic bank the shop owner has told them to never touch and finds dozens of two dollar bills inside.

## Chapters 13-20 Analysis

Miranda meets the boy who hit Sal and discovers he is a highly intelligent sixth grader at her school. This boy, Marcus, tells her that time travel is possible, something Miranda



continuously reads about in her favorite book. This touches on the theme of time travel and gives the reader the suggestion that time travel might touch on one of the mysteries that propel the plot.

Miranda finds two notes from an unknown source. One note is in her home, suggesting someone used the hidden spare key to plant the note in the apartment. The second warns Miranda not to talk to anyone about these notes and to write a story that contains information that has not yet happened. This note is confusing and a little frightening to Miranda. It also hints are foreknowledge, again touching on the theme of time travel.

Miranda, Annemarie, and Colin have all gotten a job at a sandwich shop near their school. This job lasts only forty-five minutes a day and the payment is only a cheese sandwich and soda, but it is an important part of the plot because this job will lead to several important conflicts within the plot.



# Chapters 21-30

## Chapters 21-30 Summary

In chapter twenty-one, Miranda's mother again practices her skills for the game show.

In chapter twenty-two, Julia has begun hanging out at the store, but the owner refuses to give her a job as well. Miranda refers to Julia as Swiss Miss because of a trip to Switzerland she took with her family. The owner of the shop picks up on this and calls her that too.

In chapter twenty-three, Miranda and Annemarie run into Julia at the bathrooms at school. Julia criticizes Annemarie for eating the sandwiches from the sandwich shop. Miranda asks Annemarie what Julia means, but she refuses to answer. Later, in class, Julia shoots a rubber band at Miranda.

In chapter twenty-four, Miranda sees Marcus again in the hallway at school, but he does not seem to remember who she is.

In chapter twenty-five, Julia is once again thrown out of the sandwich shop. Miranda is secretly happy about this because she is afraid Annemarie will want to be her friend again.

In chapter twenty-six, Louisa comes to Miranda's apartment and tells her that she misses having her around. Miranda's mother comes home from work crabby. Richard misses a pair of shoes that he left in the apartment. Miranda and her mother think they might have been stolen the day the door was left open.

In chapter twenty-seven, the kids are stuck at school during lunch because a naked man is running wild in the area. Annemarie has some kind of seizure that Julia recognizes immediately and shows Miranda how to deal with it. Later, Annemarie is called to the nurse and goes home.

In chapter twenty-eight, Julia tells Miranda that Annemarie has epilepsy and is not supposed to eat bread. Later, Miranda walks home behind Sal and sees him become frightened when Marcus comes up behind him. Marcus walks by them both without noticing them.

In chapter twenty-nine, Miranda calls Annemarie and learns someone left a rose on her doormat. Miranda is afraid Colin did it.

In chapter thirty, Miranda wears her winter coat for the first time and finds a third note in the pocket. This note lists several events that will happen in the future to prove the writer's knowledge.



## Chapters 21-30 Analysis

Julia becomes a thorn in Miranda's side in these chapters. Julia begins hanging out at the sandwich shop and she begins forcing herself between Miranda and Annemarie. This causes Miranda to become quite happy when the sandwich shop owner shows distaste for her Julia. It never occurs to Miranda that the owner of the shop might have reasons to dislike Julia beyond loyalty to his new employees.

Miranda attempts to befriend Marcus but finds him often distracted and unaware of what is going on around him. It occurs to Miranda to tell Sal he should not fear Marcus, but she decides not to because Sal has stopped being her friend. This will prove to be important later in the novel.

Finally, Miranda finds a third note in the pocket of her winter coat. This note has three things on it that appear to be events that will take place in the future to prove the authenticity of the writer. This again suggests time travel or foreknowledge of events about to take place. This touches on Miranda's favorite book, a book of time travel, and a conversation Miranda had with Marcus once.



# Chapters 31-37

## Chapters 31-37 Summary

In chapter thirty-one, Miranda runs into Marcus on the street and asks him questions about time travel. Julia suddenly joins them and attempts to use a diamond ring to explain time travel to Miranda, but she continues to not understand. Miranda then asks why Marcus hit Sal and he tells her he had reasons, mostly to see what would happen. Then the Quack nearly runs them over, then turns in a panic when he comes face-to-face with Marcus.

In chapter thirty-two, Miranda's count on the rolls at the sandwich shop comes up short. Later, Miranda finds two rolls in the bottom of Colin's knapsack.

In chapter thirty-three, Miranda goes to visit Annemarie and learns that she has been on a special diet for a long time and that she has been throwing out the lunch her dad makes her each day. When Miranda walks home, she gives the homeless man her sandwich that she did not eat that day. The homeless man asks about a burn scale, something Miranda has never heard of.

In chapter thirty-four, Miranda's mother tells Miranda that Richard wants to get married. Miranda is thrilled, but her mother continues to hesitate.

In chapter thirty-five, Annemarie sleeps over at Miranda's. When Annemarie arrives, her father has brought special food for her to eat. The next morning, Annemarie is still there. Miranda is happy because Sal always went home in the middle of the night. Miranda is also shocked when her mother gets up early to cook.

In chapter thirty-six, Annemarie, Colin, and Miranda are fired from their job because someone stole the ceramic bank filled with two dollar bills. Annemarie buys a card and they all sign it, hoping to get their job back.

In chapter thirty-seven, the sandwich shop owner allows them to come back to work, but tells them Julia is no longer allowed in his shop. It is then that the kids realize the shop owner is prejudiced against Julia because she is black. They all three quit.

## Chapters 31-37 Analysis

Miranda asks Marcus about time travel and they are joined by Julia. Julia seems to know as much, if not more, about time travel as Marcus. This will prove to be important later in the novel. At the same time, the homeless man outside of Miranda's building runs into she and Marcus. The man appears to panic when he comes face to face with Marcus, something that only seems to underscore his oddness.



Miranda, Colin, and Annemarie are fired from the sandwich shop because someone stole the ceramic bank filled with two dollar bills. This is a surprising turn of events, but the reader feels confident none of these three stole it. The shop owner thinks Julia stole it because she is black, a revelation that makes Miranda realize that she has been discriminating against Julia along with this man without seeing the dark motives he had. It is a grown up revelation that will change the way Miranda looks at the people around her.



# Chapters 38-45

## Chapters 38-45 Summary

In chapter thirty-eight, Miranda spends the first few days of Christmas break alone.

In chapter thirty-nine, Miranda gets a first edition of her favorite book from Richard for Christmas. The author signed it personally. This is the second thing listed in the third note, the proof the author offered to Miranda. This again frightens Miranda.

In chapter forty, Miranda goes out on New Year's Day and calls Annemarie from a payphone. Annemarie's father invites her over and Miranda and Annemarie make amends. However, Miranda did not tell her mother where she was going and she gets in trouble when her mother tracks her down to Annemarie's house. Miranda and her mother go to a movie, forgetting that Richard is supposed to meet them at the apartment.

In chapter forty-one, Miranda decides to be nice to people. This begins with taking a girl in her class to the bathroom when she is too shy to ask.

In chapter forty-two, Miranda writes a note and gives it to Julia in an attempt to make amends.

In chapter forty-three, Miranda spends the afternoon at the corner store before going home. At home, Miranda discovers that Sal has invited Colin over. Colin comes to Miranda's door and gives her a kiss.

In chapter forty-four, Miranda goes to Julia's house to bake a special cake for Annemarie's birthday. Miranda discovers that Julia has a copy of Miranda's favorite book.

In chapter forty-five, Miranda is walking home when she sees Sal ahead of her. Marcus comes out of his building and calls to Sal. In a panic, Sal runs. Marcus sees that Sal is about to run in front of a truck and tries to stop him, but cannot catch him. The homeless man, however, is at the right place at the right time and is able to kick Sal out of the way just in time. Afterward, Miranda sees the words book, bag, pocket, and shoe scratch into the side of the mailbox. Miranda then sees a shoe on the street, a shoe that belonged to Richard and was stolen from their apartment. Inside is the fourth note. This note instructs Miranda to write her story down and to give it to the writer of these notes in person.



## Chapters 38-45 Analysis

Miranda has sudden insight into human beings and relationships. Miranda decides to start being nice to the people around her, including Julia. It turns out Miranda and Julia have a lot in common, including the book that Miranda loves so much.

All the notes have mentioned that the writer is coming to save a friend of Miranda's. In chapter forty-five, Miranda finally realizes what this means when she watches Sal nearly hit by a truck and saved by the homeless man. Miranda is so disturbed by these events that she writes it out in numbered points, trying to make sure she does not miss anything important. The reader realizes this is the climax of the novel, the moment everything else has been leading up to.

Miranda finds the fourth and final note in a pair of shoes that once belonged to Richard but were worn by the homeless man who saved Sal's life. Now the reader knows that this man is the author of the notes. However, questions remain, such as who is he and why did he save Sal's life?





# Chapters 46-55

## Chapters 46-55 Summary

In chapter forty-six, Miranda finds herself thinking about the notes, all of them, as she waits for her mother to return from the hospital.

In chapter forty-seven, Miranda visits Sal at home after the accident. Sal explains to her that he wanted to take a break from their friendship because she was his only friend and he wanted some more friends, hopefully male friends. They decide it is okay to be friends again, just not exclusively.

In chapter forty-eight, Miranda is working in the main office again when two cops showed up, wanting to talk to Marcus. Miranda quickly calls her mother and gets Marcus from class, hiding in the dentist's office until her mother can convince the police that Marcus did nothing wrong.

In chapter forty-nine, the postcard comes from The \$20,000 Pyramid, fulfilling the last of the note writer's information on the future. Miranda decides it is time to write her letter, though she still does not know where to deliver it.

In chapter fifty, Richard, Louisa, and Sal go with Miranda and her mother to the studio. They watch Miranda's mother play the game and are excited when she wins the speed round.

In chapter fifty-one, Miranda's mother wins \$10,000 in the winner's circle. However, she loses the next round. At the same time, Miranda realizes how the homeless man knew to save Sal. He is a time traveler.

In chapter fifty-two, Miranda, Richard, and her mother celebrate both her mother's win and Richard's birthday. Richard is given a key to the apartment for his birthday while Miranda and Richard give Miranda's mother applications to law school. They want Miranda's mother to use the money to finish law school.

In chapter fifty-three, Miranda begins the letter the note writer asked for. Miranda begins thinking about the mailbox and how the homeless man would often sleep under it. Miranda goes to the mailbox and finds a picture of an older woman stuck under it. Miranda recognizes Julia in the picture even though she is much older. Miranda puts the picture back.

In chapter fifty-four, Miranda settles into a new routine with Annemarie and Sal both her friends.

In chapter fifty-five, Miranda finishes her letter and intends to give it to Marcus. However, Miranda leaves out what she knows about Marcus and Julia.



## Chapters 46-55 Analysis

Miranda and Sal make amends. Miranda realizes that Sal only wanted more friends outside of their friendship, but he did not know how to tell her. Miranda realizes she knew this all along and just did not see the signs.

Miranda's mother goes on the game show and wins ten thousand dollars. Miranda and Richard encourage her to go back to law school, something they have come to see is her deepest desire. Richard gets a key to the apartment. It is clear that things have taken a turn for the good in this family.

Miranda finally realizes that the homeless man was Marcus as an old man. Marcus had come to save Sal because he felt guilty for causing his death in the first place. Not only this, but Miranda comes to believe that Marcus and Julia will be married when they are older. This information Miranda keeps to herself, realizing there are some things about the future someone just should not know ahead of time.

# Characters

## Miranda

Miranda is a sixth grade student living in New York City during the late 1970s. Miranda is the only child of a single mother and has had the same best friend since she was a baby. Now, however, Miranda discovers that her best friend no longer wants to be her friend for reasons he has not explained to her. This forces Miranda to make friends with girls her own age at school so that she is not forced to be alone.

As Miranda struggles to understand why her best friend no longer wants to be friends with her, she begins getting strange notes from some unknown person. Miranda puts these notes aside and ignores them, but things happen that cause her to go back and look closer at these notes. In time, Miranda comes to believe that these notes were sent to her by a person traveling in time. Miranda decides to follow the instructions in these notes by writing down a story of the things that have been happening in her life over the past few months.

## Miranda's Mother

Miranda's mother is an unhappy woman who once aspired to be a lawyer but had to give up her dreams because of Miranda's birth. This leaves Miranda's mother working as a receptionist rather than a lawyer, something that makes her increasingly unhappy with each passing day.

Miranda's mother is a fan of the television game show *The \$20,000 Pyramid*. Miranda's mother practices constantly and soon learns that she has been accepted to appear on the show. Miranda's mother wins ten thousand dollars. Miranda and her mother have a long list of things they want to do with any winnings they might get from the game show, but Miranda and Richard decide that Miranda's mother should go to law school with the money.

## Richard

Richard is the boyfriend of Miranda's mother. Richard is a lawyer with the law firm where Miranda's mother works. Richard is perfect, at least in the opinion of Miranda's mother. However, Richard is just a simple man who loves Miranda and her mother and wants to marry them. In the end, Miranda's mother gets over her fear of commitment and change, allowing Richard to have a key to their apartment.



## Sal

Sal is Miranda's best friend. However, at the beginning of the novel, Miranda tells how Sal has begun walking home without her and avoiding her at lunch. Sal eventually tells Miranda he no longer wants to be her friend. Miranda spends a great deal of time during the novel worrying over this break with her best friend. Miranda and Sal have been friends since babyhood. In the end, Miranda learns that Sal has broken off their friendship because he has decided he needs to have more friends than just Miranda and he might like to have some male friends.

## Marcus

Marcus is a boy who attends the same school as Miranda and Sal. Marcus is a large, powerful boy, but he has little interest in bullying other kids. Instead, Marcus is highly intelligent and likes to read math books. Marcus is also interested in time travel.

When Miranda first meets Marcus, she believes he is a bully like his brother and other kids in the neighborhood because he punches Sal. However, Miranda later learns that Marcus does this because his brother told him to act like a man. Marcus is in fact a kind person when he is not distracted by his studies.

In the end, Miranda learns that Marcus will eventually learn to travel in time. In fact, the homeless man who saves Sal's life the day of the truck accident is Marcus as an old man. Time travel has affected Marcus's mind; therefore, he appears insane. However, he is in fact highly intelligent and there for the express purpose of saving Sal.

## Annemarie

Annemarie is a student in Miranda's class. When Miranda and Sal stop hanging out together, Miranda becomes friends with Annemarie. Annemarie also had a best friend, Julia, but the two of them also had a fight. Miranda eventually learns that Annemarie is epileptic and not supposed to eat bread, something she does on a daily basis with Miranda and Colin.

Annemarie has a very overprotective father who has her on a special diet because of her medical condition. This causes Annemarie to be docile, allowing everyone to boss her around. Annemarie is kind and seems to understand why people treat her as they do. The reader suspects it is Annemarie's character that helps inspire Miranda to be nicer to those around her.

## Julia

Julia is the daughter of wealthy people who like to travel, and therefore Julia is well traveled. Julia likes to talk a lot about herself, causing some jealousy in those around



her. This appears to be part of the reason Miranda dislikes Julia. Julia can also be difficult to get along with because she seems to think she is smarter than everyone else. As the novel progresses, however, Miranda comes to understand some of the reasons why Julia acts as she does.

Miranda discovers that Julia's parents do not understand the things she likes and they attempt to force their own tastes on her. Julia's parents are also somewhat self absorbed, leaving Julia to often care for herself. Julia likes science fiction and understands time travel in a way that helps her explain it to Miranda. In the end, Miranda realizes that Julia and Marcus will one day get married, something that does not surprise the reader because these two characters have a lot in common.

## Colin

Colin is a boy in Miranda's class. Colin begins going to lunch with Miranda and Annemarie. One day Colin convinces the owner of a local sandwich shop to give the three of them a job. Colin is an insightful boy who understands that the owner of the shop is a dark man who will get some measure of pleasure from proving the bakery has short-changed him in buns. For this reason, Colin steals a couple of buns from the bag. Later, Colin kisses Miranda, becoming her middle school boyfriend.

## Louisa

Louisa is Sal's mother. Louisa is also a single mother and she and Miranda's mother became great friends when Miranda and her mother first moved into their apartment. It is for this reason that Miranda and Sal have been best friends since childhood. Louisa works in a nursing home and she often brings lists from The \$20,000 Pyramid for Miranda's mother to practice with for her appearance on the show.

## Homeless Man

There is a homeless man living on the sidewalk outside of Miranda's building. This man appears insane, often kicking at nothing along the side of the street and sleeping with his head under the mailbox. Miranda later discovers that this homeless man, whom she calls Quack or Laughing Man, is actually a grown up version of Marcus, who has come to this time through time travel in order to keep Sal from being killed by a truck. Instead, the homeless man dies in Sal's place after he kicks Sal out of the way. This homeless man is also the author of the strange notes that Miranda has received and she discovers that under the mailbox is a picture of an older woman whom Miranda recognizes as her friend Julia.



# Objects/Places

## Mysteries of Science Poster

Miranda is carrying her Mysteries of Science Poster on which she wrote about yawning when Sal is punched by Marcus.

## Ceramic Bank

The sandwich shop owner has a ceramic bank he warns the kids to stay away from when he goes to work there. Later, the bank is stolen, and Miranda eventually finds out it was stolen by the homeless man who lives outside her building.

## Spare Key

Miranda and her mother hide a spare key to their apartment in the fire hose down the hall. This key is stolen by an unknown person and used to leave notes for Miranda and steal a pair of Richard's shoes.

## Special Snacks

Annemarie's father has placed her on a special diet to control her epilepsy, and when she goes to stay the night at Miranda's, he brings a box of snacks for her to eat.

## Notes

Miranda receives four odd notes from an unknown author that ask her to write a letter telling her story. Miranda has no idea until the end of the novel what story the author wants to hear.

## A Wrinkle in Time

A Wrinkle in Time by Madeleine L'Engle is a book about time travel. This book is Miranda's favorite and she receives a first edition signed by the author for Christmas.

## Shoes

Someone steals a pair of Richard's shoes from Miranda's apartment. Later, Miranda discovers a note inside one of these shoes.



## **Book, Bag, Pocket, Shoe**

Miranda hears the homeless man repeating two words one day: bookbag and pocketshoe. Later, Miranda sees the words book, bag, pocket, and shoe scratched into the side of the mailbox and realizes these are the places where she has found the mysterious notes.

## **Mailbox**

The homeless man often sleeps with his head under the mailbox.

## **The \$20,000 Pyramid**

The \$20,000 Pyramid is a game show that aired in the late seventies and early eighties. On this show a contestant partnered with a celebrity and attempted to figure out a word or category from clues given by their partner. Miranda's mother wants to appear on this show and eventually wins ten thousand dollars on the show.

## **Sandwich Shop**

There is a sandwich shop near Miranda's school with only one employee. Colin asks the man why there is only one employee and he tells them he is the owner and he does not want to pay anyone to work there. Colin talks the man into allow him, Annemarie, and Miranda work there during their lunch hour each day in exchange for a soda and cheese sandwich.

## **New York City**

The novel is set in New York City in 1978-1979.



# Themes

## Time Travel

Time travel is first introduced into the book when the reader learns that Miranda's favorite book is *A Wrinkle in Time*. For those familiar with this book, the theme of time travel is immediately obvious. For others, this theme comes up when Miranda tells Marcus the themes of the book and he begins to explain to her how time travel might one day be possible.

As Miranda begins getting the notes from the mysterious stranger, the reader begins to see subtle hints to time travel. The first note tells Miranda to write him a letter and to mention where the house key is. Miranda's mother points out that whoever left the note obviously already knows where the spare house key is kept because he stole it to place the note in Miranda's book. Later, the mysterious writer tells Miranda he knows she shared the first note with someone, and then another note gives Miranda three events that she will experience later that will prove his truthfulness. All of this hints at foreknowledge, tipping the reader off to the idea of time travel again.

In the end, Miranda realizes that the homeless man living outside her building is her friend Marcus as an old man. Miranda believes Marcus has time traveled to her time in order to save her friend Sal from being hit by a truck. This seems miraculous, but the notes support Miranda's ideas as does some of the evidence she finds under the mailbox where the homeless man spent a great deal of time. For this reason, time travel is an important theme of the book.

## Friendship

Miranda begins the novel by discussing her friendship with her downstairs neighbor, Sal. Miranda has been friends with Sal since she was an infant and her mother and she first moved into the apartment they still live in. However, at some point earlier in the school year, Sal decided he no longer wants to be friends with Miranda. This leaves Miranda confused, but it also forces her to befriend a girl her own age.

Miranda befriends Annemarie and quickly finds herself befriended by Colin, another boy in her class. At the same time, Miranda makes an enemy in Julia, Annemarie's former best friend. In time, however, Miranda begins to see Julia's deep affection for Annemarie and through her sharp outer shell. Julia is really just like Miranda, mourning the loss of a good friend and afraid of being alone.

In the end, Miranda learns that Sal simply wanted more friends besides Miranda and a few male friends. Miranda also discovers that it is nice having some female friends of her own. Miranda and Sal find a way to continue their friendship while including others. Miranda also finds a way to make friends with Julia, expanding her group of friends.





## Aspirations

Miranda's mother began law school with the hopes of one day being a good lawyer. However, in her first year, Miranda's mother was forced to drop out of school because of the birth of her only child. Miranda's mother now works as a receptionist in a law office, a job that is unsatisfying and frustrating. For this reason, Miranda's mother focuses on becoming a contestant on The \$20,000 Pyramid because it gives her something to dream about, something bigger than her dead end life. In the end, Miranda and Richard, her mother's boyfriend, recognize this about Miranda's mother and encourage her to take the winnings from the game show to continue her law education.

Miranda also befriends a boy at her school named Marcus. Marcus is a large boy whose brother is a rough and tumble sort, a boy who thinks getting into a fight is a manly thing. Marcus is highly intelligent, however, and rarely excited over anything less complicated than a good math problem. This causes tension between Marcus and his brother, leading to the episode in which Marcus hits his brother. However, it also allows Marcus to aspire to something higher than the destiny that most likely awaits his brother. Marcus will one day find a way to travel in time. For these reasons, aspirations is a theme of the book.



# Style

## Point of View

The novel is written in the first person point of view. Miranda is the main character and the narrator of the novel. Miranda tells the story as though she is talking to the person who has written her four mysterious notes that she does not understand until she reaches the end of her narration. The novel is a story she has been instructed to write in these notes, a story that tells of the homeless man who died to save her friend Sal's life.

The point of view of this novel is appropriate for this plot for several reasons. The point of view allows an intimate relationship with the main character, helping the reader to care what happens to Miranda. The reader roots for Miranda as she struggles to make friends and help her mother reach her own dreams. The reader also cries with Miranda when she is hurt and struggles to solve the mystery of the notes as Miranda does. The point of view also allows the writer to express some information in different formats, showing the reader just how important those facts are to the plot. The point of view of this novel is highly appropriate for this novel because it allows the writer to use her narrating character in ways she would not be able to do in another point of view.

## Setting

The novel is set in New York City in 1978-1979. The writer has most likely chosen this time period for several reasons. First, the show *The \$20,000 Pyramid* was a popular game show in this time period and it would have allowed for the winnings that prove so important to Miranda's mother at the end of this novel. Second, the author herself was a child in New York City about this time period; therefore, she had personal experience from which to draw her story. Finally, time travel is an important aspect of the novel and setting the novel thirty years in the past leaves room for a reasonable reader to believe in the time traveling experience of one of the characters.

The setting of this novel works well with the plot for the reasons previously stated. The setting is also important to the plot because it is a large city, but a small neighbor that sets an atmosphere for the main character that fits with the events that take place in the novel. If the author had set her novel in a smaller town, perhaps in the west coast, the novel would not have the same impact because there would not be the assumption of danger that exists in this novel and the appearance of a homeless man on the street outside an apartment building most likely would not be as well tolerated.

## Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is simple English. The intended audience of this novel is young readers, therefore the language is less difficult than a novel written for older children or adults might be. The author does not use foreign phrases or unfamiliar slang



in her writing, therefore there is little in the novel that the average reader might not understand.

The novel is written about young people for young people. The author keeps the language appropriate to what a child of that age might understand and how they might speak. There are adults in the novel, but the majority of the novel they are speaking with children, therefore their language remains simple as well. The author has done a wonderful job keeping her language appropriate for her characters, making it easy for the reader to comprehend.

## Structure

The novel is divided in multiple chapters, each only a few pages long. The novel is written as though the narrator is remembering the events; therefore, the time line is not precisely linear. The author includes many flashbacks as the novel progresses, particularly in the beginning as the narrator recalls events that took place months previously. The novel is written in both exposition and dialogue, including multiple scenes while also filling spaces in time with explanations of events that have taken place outside the vision of the reader.

The novel includes a main plot and several subplots. In the main plot, Miranda has received four notes from a mysterious writer and works to figure out who the author is and what he wants from her. One subplot follows the disintegration of Miranda's long time friendship with her downstairs neighbor, Sal. Another subplot follows Miranda as she deals with Julia, a tough, angry young girl who goes to her school with her. All the plots resolve nicely in the final pages of the novel.



## Quotes

"And then there's the date she's supposed to show up, scrawled in blue pen on a line at the bottom of the card: April 27, 1979. Just like you said."

Chap. 1, p. 1

"Richard and I figured out a while ago that the more stuff Mom swipes from the office supply closet, the more she's hating work."

Chap. 2, p. 6

"I was named after a criminal. Mom says that's a dramatic way of looking at things, but sometimes the truth is dramatic."

Chap. 3, p. 7

"Losing Sal was like a long list of bad things, and somewhere in the top half of the list was the fact that I had to walk home alone past the crazy guy on our corner."

Chap. 6, p. 16

"But if someone sat on my legs and forced me to name the day the whole true story began, I'd say it was the day Sal got punched."

Chap. 7, p. 20

"Annemarie's apartment didn't involve keys. Instead she had a doorman who slapped her five and a dad who opened the door upstairs."

Chap. 12, p. 37

"Your first note was written in tiny words on a little square of stiff paper that felt like it had once gotten wet."

Chap. 17, p. 60

"According to Jimmy, there's a two-dollar bill in circulation for every twelve one-dollar bills."

Chap. 25, p. 81

"Why was I the one getting notes? Why did I have to do something about whatever bad thing was going to happen? I didn't even understand what I was supposed to do! Write a letter about something that hadn't happened yet?"

Chap. 33, p. 111

"It was 1979—a new year, a new decade, almost, but school was still just school."

Chap. 41, p. 143

"44. You saved Sal's life."

Chap. 45, p. 162



"But I've decided I won't say much. I'll just hand him my letter and say, 'Try not to land in the broccoli.' He'll understand. He's a smart kid."

Chap. 55, p. 197



## Topics for Discussion

Who is Miranda? Who does she address when she talks directly to the reader of her story? What does she think this person wants to know from her? Where does Miranda suggest her story should begin? Why does Miranda pick this moment? Is this truly the beginning of Miranda's story? Explain.

Who is Miranda's mother? What does she do for a living? Why is she unhappy with her job? What sign does Richard suggest shows the growing unhappiness of Miranda's mother in her job? Why did Miranda's mother quit law school? What does that have to do with her current unhappiness? What game show does Miranda's mother hope to one day be on? Does she get her chance? Does she win?

Who is Richard? What item does he want from Miranda's mother? Why? How does Miranda feel about this? What does this suggest about Miranda's feelings for Richard? Why does Miranda's mother hesitate to become more deeply involved with Richard? How does Richard react to this? What does Miranda's relationship with Richard say about her mother? About her mother's relationships?

Compare and contrast Annemarie's relationship to Julia with Miranda's relationship with Sal. How do they compare? How are they similar? How are they different? Why does Miranda befriend Annemarie? How does this impact Sal? Julia? Why does Miranda dislike Julia? Why does Miranda eventually decide to call a truce with Julia? What does Miranda learn about Julia at the end of the novel? What does Miranda do with this information?

Discuss Marcus. What kind of person is Marcus? Why does Marcus punch Sal? Why does Marcus not notice Miranda on several occasions? What topic of conversation do Marcus and Miranda find to discuss? Who is Marcus to Miranda? What connection does she eventually find she has with Marcus? Why does Miranda save Marcus from the police at the end of the novel?

Why does Sal stop being friends with Miranda? What explanation does he give Miranda? Why did he not tell Miranda this from the beginning? How does Miranda feel when she finally learns the truth about Sal? Who does Sal bring home from school that Miranda finds herself kissing? How does Sal feel about this relationship? How does this new relationship define Miranda?

What is time travel? Why does Marcus say that it might one day be possible? Why is Marcus interested in this subject? What makes Miranda interested in the subject? Who else talks to Miranda about this subject? How does Miranda come to realize that someone she knows will one day figure out how to travel in time? What impact does this person have on Miranda? On Sal? On Miranda's friends?